

## TRANSITION-AGE CONSUMER SATISFACTION

*We had the last IEP meeting, all these adults and they are saying no. I remember the Voc Rehab person leaving the meeting, she goes, "I'll find him something." She put her hand on my shoulder because it was a scary meeting. It was. And she was encouraging. She said we'll find him something. And that was telling me she wasn't going to give up.*

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October 2009

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## **A Statement of Mission, Vision and Values**

Vocational Rehabilitation Services  
Minnesota Department of Employment & Economic Development

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### **Mission**

Empower Minnesotans with disabilities to achieve their goals for employment, independent living and community integration.

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### **Vision**

*Vocational Rehabilitation Services envisions a future in which ...*

Minnesotans with disabilities experience economic self-sufficiency and community integration, contributing their skills and energies to Minnesota's economic, political, social, cultural and educational life.

The business community and Vocational Rehabilitation Services engage one another as trusted workforce development partners.

Community Rehabilitation Programs, educators, employers, and other stakeholders and customers pursue partnerships with Vocational Rehabilitation Services to break through barriers to employment and independent living.

Vocational Rehabilitation Services is customer centered and recognized for the public transparency of its operations.

Vocational Rehabilitation Services staff are exemplary employees and leaders, the organization's valued asset. They are successful learners, take risks with new ideas, share knowledge, think critically, and adapt to change.

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### **Values**

Meaningful Work     |     Self-Determination     |     Informed Choice

Inclusion     |     Freedom from Discrimination     |     Service

Purposeful Collaboration     |     Excellence

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## **Executive Summary**

### **Satisfaction of Transition-Age Consumers**

***We had the last IEP meeting, all these adults and they are saying no. I remember the Voc Rehab person leaving the meeting, she goes, "I'll find him something." She put her hand on my shoulder because it was a scary meeting. It was. And she was encouraging. She said we'll find him something. And that was telling me she wasn't going to give up.***

## **Conclusions**

The analysis of the data of focus groups and surveys lead to seven conclusions:

### ***Conclusion Number 1:***

*In general, transition-age consumers and parents are satisfied.* Transition-age consumers and parents made this clear, although with certain qualifications, in their focus group discussions. In spite of misunderstanding several critical aspects, such as program purpose and scope of services, transition-age consumers and parents expressed appreciation for the personal concern VRS staff, especially counselors, provided as well as their availability to listen to consumer concerns.

### ***Conclusion Number 2:***

*Satisfaction of transition-age consumers and their parents is strongly related to the degree VRS staff demonstrate personal concern for the transition-age consumers.* For the most part, transition-age consumers and parents noticed and appreciated the sense of personal concern VRS staff provide. That sense of personal concern was the main determining factor of transition-age consumer satisfaction. Transition-age consumers and parents provided examples of satisfaction with services in spite of vocational assessments that were contrary to their interests, exploratory experiences to which they were opposed, or employment goals they initially felt were incorrect. In practically every case the consumer or parent concerns were mitigated by the caring attitudes of VRS staff.

### ***Conclusion Number 3:***

*VRS staff have a positive perception of the program.* High proportions of VRS staff believe that *Almost Always* or *Often*: transition-age consumers and parents are satisfied; communication between VRS staff and transition-age consumers, parents, educators and others is good; transition-age consumers, parents and educators understand and are aware of what VRS staff do in the course of providing services to transition-age consumers; and communication and coordination between VRS staff and educators is good.

#### **Conclusion Number 4:**

*The positive perception of VRS expressed by large proportions of VRS staff is not always shared by similar proportions of transition-age consumers, parents or educators.* Meaningfully lower proportions of educators than VRS staff perceived that transition-age consumers and parents:

- understood VRS;
- understood the mechanics of provision of its services;
- understood the Employment Plan; or
- understood that the Employment Plan incorporated transition-age consumer strengths or allowed for expression of vocational interests.

Meaningfully lower proportions of educators than VRS staff perceived good communication and coordination between themselves and VRS staff.

On ten online survey items about the Employment Plan stage, meaningfully lower proportions of educators responded that a condition or activity occurred *Almost Always* or *Often*. On these ten responses differences between educators and VRS staff ranged from 13% to 40%, averaging 25%.

#### **Conclusion Number 5:**

*Transition-age consumers and parents do not always have an optimal understanding of VRS.* Misunderstandings included:

- the name and purpose of VRS;
- services to expect from the program;
- vocational assessments;
- career exploration; and
- the Employment Plan.

#### **Conclusion Number 6:**

*VRS staff and educators have not reached an optimal level of communication and coordination.* Comments from educators described the difficulty to secure attendance of VRS staff at IEP meetings, although VRS staff describe not being included early enough.

Meaningfully lower proportions than VRS staff noticed positive aspects of transition-age consumer services (Conclusion Number 4), an indicator of poor communication.

### **Conclusion Number 7:**

*Differences exist between VRS staff in metropolitan and greater Minnesota areas.*

Greater proportions of VRS staff from offices in *Greater Minnesota* have better transition-age consumer understanding of the Employment Plan, parent understanding of the Employment Plan; communication with educators; and coordination with postsecondary education, than those in the *Metro* (Minneapolis/St. Paul) area.

## **Recommendations**

### **Recommendation Number 1:**

Foster transition-age consumer satisfaction.

VRS should continue to focus on providing service to its transition-age consumers that incorporates demonstration of personal concern by VRS staff. VRS should also continue its efforts to assist all staff in developing an orientation toward transition-age consumers that incorporates that concept.

### **Recommendation Number 2:**

Communication with transition-age consumers and parents.

VRS should continue, and increase, its efforts to foster communication with and understanding by transition-age consumers and parents of transition age consumers with the goal that all transition-age consumers and parents:

- know its name;
- know its purpose;
- know about and understand all assessments that are conducted;
- know about career exploration opportunities; and
- know about and understand the Employment Plan.

### **Recommendation Number 3:**

Communication among parents.

VRS should develop the structure for parent support/communication groups, so that parents can communicate with each other and share ideas and information.



#### **Recommendation Number 4:**

Communication and coordination with educators.

VRS should continue, and increase, its efforts to foster communication and coordination with educators with the goal that:

- VRS involvement in IEP's will be appropriate;
- VRS staff and educators will provide services seamlessly; and
- Employment Plans will be coordinated with IEP's.

#### **Recommendation Number 5:**

Resolve geographical differences among VRS staff.

VRS should address and resolve differences in the provision of services that exist between VRS staff in the Twin Cities, metropolitan area and VRS staff in Greater Minnesota.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The Rehabilitation Act, Section 105(c)(4), and the Federal Regulations at 34 CFR 361.17(h)(4) require the State Rehabilitation Council (SRC), on its own or jointly with Vocational Rehabilitation Services (VRS), to conduct a review and analysis of the effectiveness of and consumer satisfaction with vocational rehabilitation services provided under the Act.

The SRC, in 2009, focused specifically upon the satisfaction of transition-age consumers and requested VRS to gather data from transition-age consumers, parents of transition-age consumers, VRS staff and educators.

### **Research Questions**

Two fundamental assumptions helped guide the study: 1) that VRS is doing certain things in its service procedure that are excellent and highly appreciated, and 2) that there are probably other things done by VRS that can be improved. The assumptions are evident in the research questions for the study:

1. To what extent are transition-age consumers and their parents satisfied with the services provided to them by VRS?
2. Where is VRS doing well in providing services to transition-age consumers?
3. Where is VRS encountering problems providing services to transition-age consumers?

## **Method**

For a comprehensive perspective of transition-age consumer satisfaction, VRS sought data from: transition-age consumers, parents of transition-age consumers, VRS, and educators.

VRS gave considerable thought to eliciting information from each of the groups, with the principal criterion being the selection of the method most likely to validly represent the views of the group. Previous data-gathering experiences provided guidance in choosing the method. VRS used focus groups with transition-age consumers and parents, and online surveys with VRS and educators.

Staff from VRS and the Department of Education, as well as members of the State Rehabilitation Council, contributed to development of the focus groups and online surveys. All were given the opportunity to suggest topics and asked to review focus group questions and survey items.

Similar and related questions were used in the focus groups and online surveys to allow for subsequent comparisons when analyzing the data. The procedural steps VRS takes – from when a consumer contacts VRS to the closure of the case – provided the structure for questions in the focus groups and for the online surveys. Focus group and survey items were grouped in five segments: understanding VRS, vocational assessments, career exploration, Employment Plan, and outcomes. The outcome segment included the VRS role in developing transition-age consumer self-awareness and self-advocacy capacity.

### **Focus Group Participants and Survey Respondents**

#### **Transition-age Consumers and Parents of Transition-Age Consumers**

Four focus group sessions were held with transition-aged consumers, and four sessions were held with parents and guardians of transition-aged consumers. A total of 16 transition-age consumers and 26 transition-age consumer parents participated in the eight sessions. Ninety minutes were devoted to discussion with a break after 45 minutes for a meal.

The transition-age consumers who participated were fairly evenly split by gender; and their primary disabilities were more cognitive than physical. Parents were overwhelmingly female. (This document refers to them as parents because all of the participants identified themselves as natural or adoptive parents rather than guardians.) It seemed, in most of the cases, that the mother was the parent most involved with the child's case, more able or interested than the father in attending the focus group.

While two of the site locations were Metro (Minneapolis/St Paul) and two were Greater Minnesota, there wasn't a simple urban-rural split. Some of the west Metro participants identified themselves as rural, living on the outskirts of the metro area, and some of the Mankato and St. Cloud area participants reside in those areas' city centers. Two metro-area parents were unavailable during the time when a focus group was scheduled in the metro area, and attended the Mankato or St Cloud group.

## **VRS Staff**

All VRS staff received an online survey, to which 308 (78%) responded. About 65% of those who completed the survey indicated being VRS counselors. The remainder included VRS Placement Coordinators, VR Techs, Rehabilitation Representatives, VR Business Service Specialists and Rehabilitation Area Managers.

## **Educators**

Each VRS counseling team identified educators with whom they interacted in the course of handling the cases of transition-age consumers. The teams submitted a listing of almost 1700 names and email addresses. The educator database was examined by personnel in the Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development and the Minnesota Department of Education, and efforts were made to eliminate duplicate and erroneous email addresses, as well as those of persons who were no longer working as educators. This effort reduced the number of valid email addresses to 1312, and 808 (62 %) responded to the survey. Of those educators who responded, 654 indicated having had interactions with VRS within the past two years and were able to complete the survey (Appendix 2).

## **Analysis of the Data**

### **Focus Groups**

Each focus group was recorded via a digital voice recorder and a transcript was produced. The written transcripts were used to identify prevailing themes of satisfaction and related issues identified by the discussion questions.

### **Online Surveys**

The responses to the online surveys were tabulated and the responses to the open-ended items were assessed for prevailing themes.

### **Consolidation and Comparison of the Data**

The data were reported in several stages. First, each group's data were described within the VRS procedural framework, as delineated above. Second, each group's data were analyzed. Third, comparisons were made between the respondent groups.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The Rehabilitation Act, Section 105(c)(4), and the Federal Regulations at 34 CFR 361.17(h)(4) require the State Rehabilitation Council (SRC), on its own or jointly with Vocational Rehabilitation Services (VRS), to conduct a review and analysis of the effectiveness of and consumer satisfaction with vocational rehabilitation services provided under the Act.

To fulfill this responsibility the SRC, in 2009, focused specifically upon the satisfaction of transition-age consumers. The council requested VRS to gather data from transition-age consumers, parents of transition-age consumers, VRS staff and educators, and to report on transition-age consumer satisfaction and its determinants.

## **Research Questions**

Transition-age consumers comprise a sizeable percentage of VRS consumers. In 2009, 39.9% of those who applied for and were approved to receive services from VRS were 22 or younger.

Naturally VRS was very interested in understanding their degree of satisfaction with its services.

Two fundamental assumptions helped guide the study: 1) that VRS is doing certain things in its service procedure that are excellent and highly appreciated, and 2) that there are probably other things done by VRS that can be improved. The assumptions are evident in the research questions for the study:

1. To what extent are transition-age consumers and their parents satisfied with the services provided to them by VRS?
2. Where is VRS doing well in providing services to transition-age consumers?
3. Where is VRS encountering problems providing services to transition-age consumers?

## **Method**

VRS sought a comprehensive perspective of transition-age consumer satisfaction, and for this reason desired data from the principal participants in the process through which transition-age consumers receive services: the transition-age consumers themselves, parents of transition-age consumers, the VRS staff who guide the provision of services, and educators, with whom services are coordinated.

The consolidated data from the four groups offers the comprehensive perspective VRS needs to fully understand the topic under investigation. Without one or more of the groups the perspective would be inadequate.

VRS gave considerable thought to eliciting information from each of the groups, with the principal criterion being the selection of the method most likely to validly represent the views of the group. Previous data-gathering experiences with these groups provided guidance in choosing the method. VRS used focus groups with transition-age consumers and parents, and online surveys with VRS and educators. Focus groups require a much greater use of time to gather and analyze data, but experience has demonstrated that surveys with transition-age consumers and parents would not have yielded a rate high enough response rate to be confident that the responses were representative. On the other hand, VRS staff, employees of the organization, and were assumed to understand the importance of the study to their organization, so it was anticipated that a large proportion would respond to a survey. Educators, because they are not part of VRS, were assumed to be less apt to respond to a survey from VRS. It helped significantly that we were able to send the link for the online survey under the name of the Department of Education's Director of Special Education, and received a sufficient rate of response to allow for the use of the data from the survey.

Staff from VRS and the Department of Education, as well as members of the State Rehabilitation Council contributed to development of the focus groups and online surveys. All were given the opportunity to suggest topics and were asked to review focus group questions and survey items.

Similar and related questions were used in the focus groups and online surveys to allow for subsequent comparisons when analyzing the data. The procedural steps VRS takes – from when a consumer contacts VRS to the closure of the case – provided the structure for questions in the focus groups and for the online surveys. Focus group and survey items were grouped in five segments: understanding VRS, vocational assessments, career exploration, Employment Plan, and outcomes. The outcome segment included the VRS role in developing transition-age consumer self-awareness and self-advocacy capacity.

## **Focus Group Participants and Survey Respondents**

### **Transition-Age Consumers and Parents of Transition-Age Consumers**

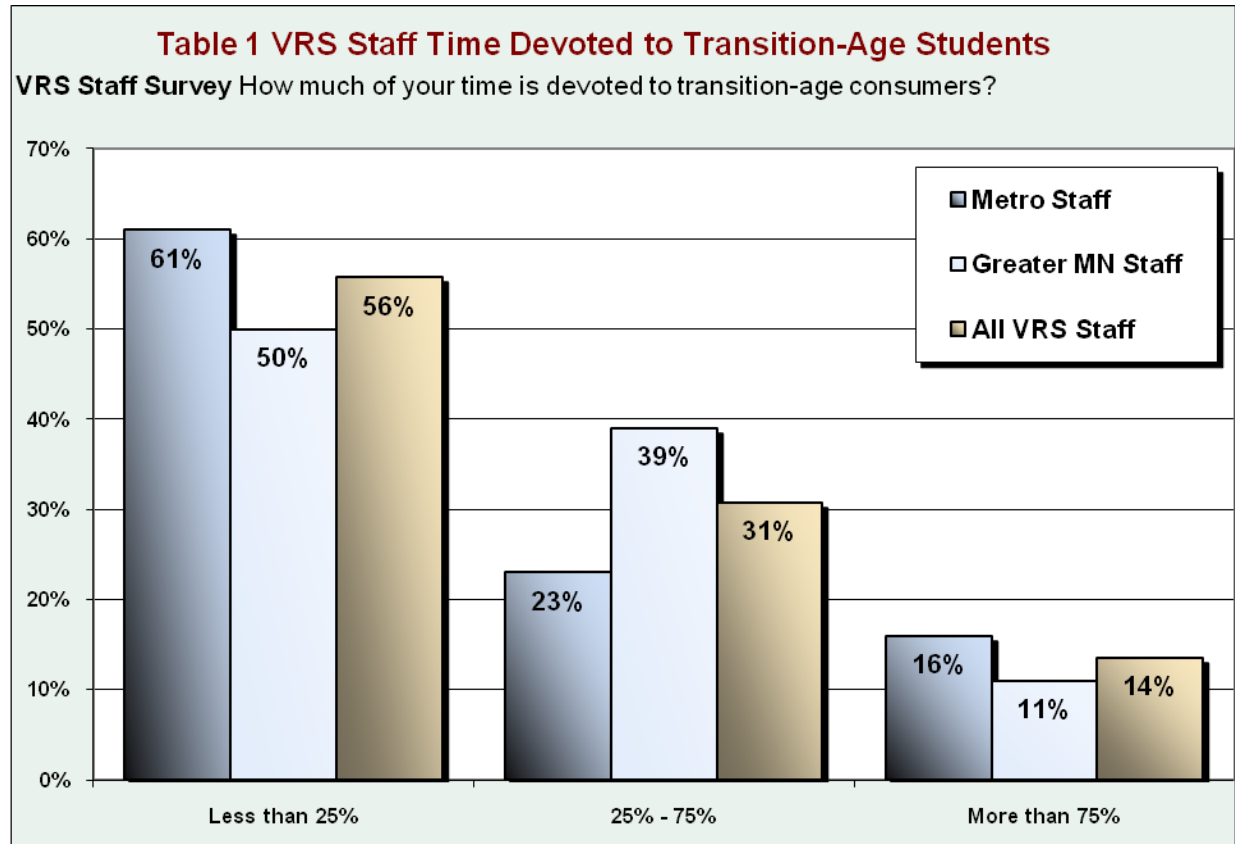
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The transition-age consumers who participated were fairly evenly split by gender; and their primary disabilities were more cognitive than physical. Parents, were overwhelmingly female. (This document refers to them as parents because all of the participants identified themselves as natural or adoptive parents rather than guardians.) It seemed, in most of the cases, that the mother was the parent most involved with the child's case, more able or interested than the father in attending the focus group.

While two of the site locations were metro and two were outstate, there wasn't a simple urban-rural split. Some of the west metro participants identified themselves as rural, living on the outskirts of the metro area, and some of the Mankato and St. Cloud area participants reside in those areas' city centers. Two metro-area parents were unavailable during the time when a focus group was scheduled in the metro area, and attended the Mankato or St Cloud group.

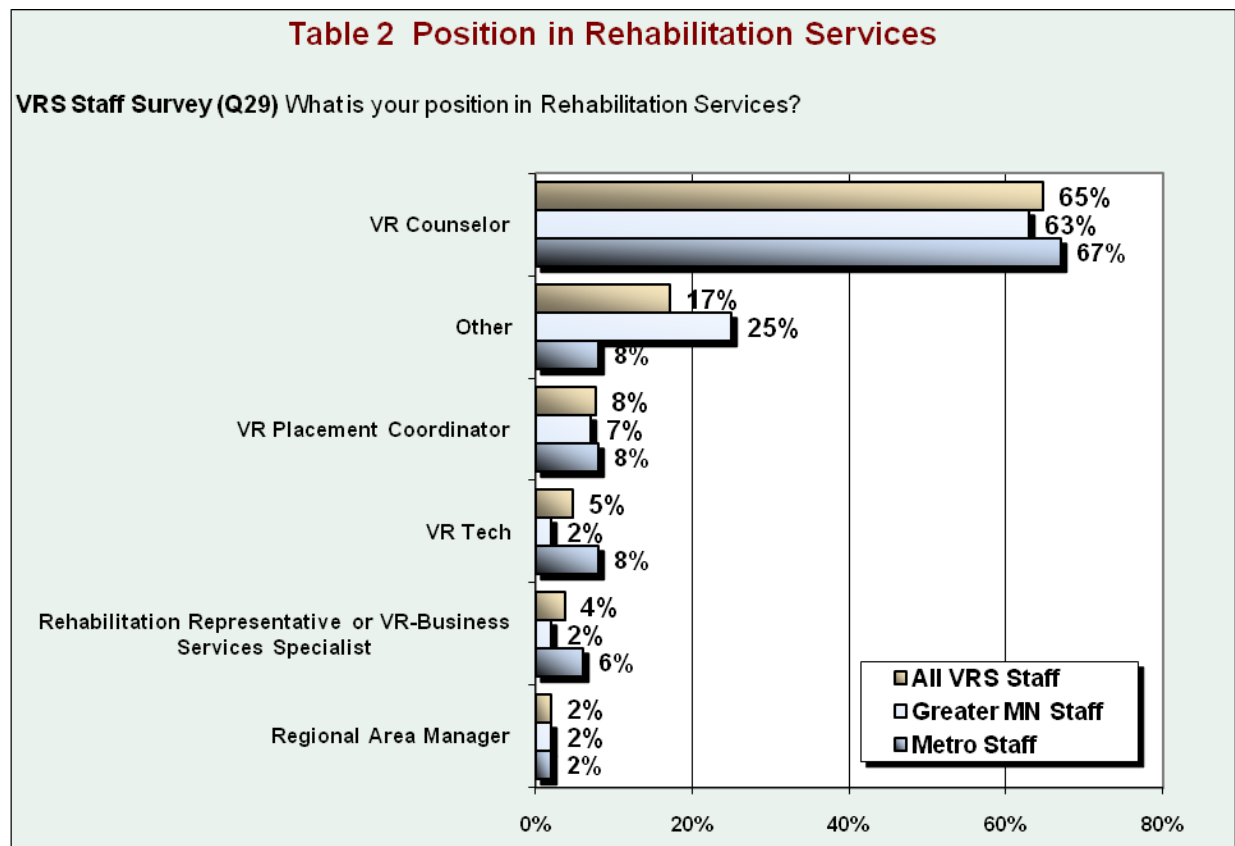
## VRS Staff

All VRS staff received an online survey (Appendix 1) to which, 308 (78%) responded. Table 1 indicates that 56% of the recipients indicated that less than 25% of their time was devoted to transition-age students, and they were not asked to complete the survey.



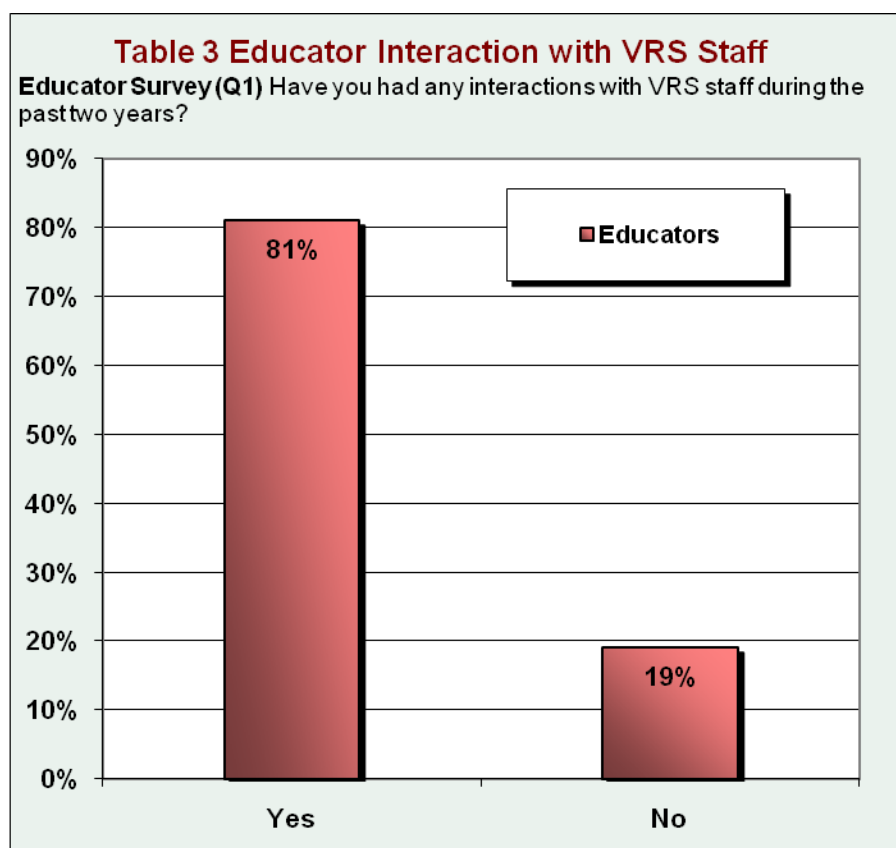


As noted in Table 2, about 65% of the group of those who completed the survey indicated being VRS counselors. The remainder included VRS Placement Coordinators, VR Techs, Rehabilitation Representatives, VR Business Service Specialists and Rehabilitation Area Managers.



## Educators

Each VRS counseling team identified educators with whom they interacted in the course of handling the cases of transition-age consumers. The teams submitted a listing of almost 1700 names and email addresses. The educator database was examined by personnel in the Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development (DEED) and the Minnesota Department of Education, and efforts were made to eliminate duplicate and erroneous email addresses, as well as those of persons who were no longer working as educators. This reduced the number of valid address to 1312, and 808 (62 %) responded to the survey. Of those educators who responded, 654 indicated having had interactions with VRS within the past two years (Table 3), and were able to complete the survey (Appendix 2).



## Description of the Data

Note: In early 2009, Rehabilitation Services changed its name to Vocational Rehabilitation Services (VRS). The surveys and focus group events for this study occurred before the name change took effect, so respondents referred to the organization by one or another the organization's former names. In keeping with accepted practice of reporting statements without editing, quotations remain verbatim accounts of what an individual said or wrote, with this explanation why VRS staff may not have used the appropriate term to refer to their organization.

### Stages of Vocational Rehabilitation Services

Transition-age consumers normally follow a process in which they learn about VRS while in secondary education. Once they meet VRS staff and are determined eligible, a vocational assessment is conducted, the consumer explores different career choices, and an Employment Plan is developed. Once the Employment Plan is approved, services are provided to assist the consumer in attaining the employment goal specified in the Employment Plan. This procedural framework was used to structure the focus groups for consumers and parents, and the online surveys for VRS staff and educators. The descriptions of the stages were provided verbally, for the focus group participants, and were part of the online surveys. The descriptions below are those provided as part of the online surveys administered to the educators. The verbal descriptions provided in the focus groups were very similar.

*Understanding Vocational Rehabilitation Services.* The time transition-age students are learning about VRS.

*Vocational Assessment.* VRS staff compile information about the transition-age students' disabilities and barriers to employment, and their vocational interests and aptitudes.

*Career Exploration.* Includes activities assisting transition-age students in making career decisions.

*Employment Plan.* In order for VRS to provide services, staff develop a document (Employment Plan) with the transition-age student specifying the student's career goal and the services VRS and other parties will provide.

*Outcomes.* Outcomes were not a recognized stage of the process of learning about, applying for and receiving services from VRS. Respondents were asked about results they might have noticed that were related to the services VRS had provided.

### Transition-Age Consumers

#### Understanding Vocational Rehabilitation Services

Transition-age consumers were asked to remember when they first were introduced to VRS, what they thought VRS would do, and who else was involved in the VRS connection.

*One of my teachers came to me and told me about it, then I figured I might as well look into it – it can't hurt – so I started the paperwork and all of that and they've helped me ever since.*

Consumers' typical initial expectation was that VRS would help in finding a job, finding a career, or help pay for school. Assistance with tuition and related supplies, such as a computer or automotive tools, was enticing.

***I was skeptical because I had a hard time finding a job and I thought they would have a hard time getting me one. They were telling me I shouldn't be skeptical and that you shouldn't worry. It made me feel just a little more comfortable.***

Consumers knew of Vocational Rehabilitation Services under a variety of names. Those who first connected through high school often knew it as Rehab Services or Voc Rehab, and those who connected outside of high school often knew it as Workforce. There was an understanding of VRS as a distinct organization, except for some consumers who were involved with public or private service organizations, such as Transition Plus. To an extent they were unclear if or how those services were connected to VRS.

***I was really excited because they would be able to help me with school and that was a really big relief.***

Almost all transition-age consumers had their first contact through high school, although each group had at least one person whose connection came through a parent, a job search or some other source following a disability-causing accident. In the high schools, either VRS counselors came unannounced to IEP meetings or teachers informed consumers about service availability. The first connections, as recalled, came anywhere from sixth to twelfth grade.

***I guess we were hoping to get something that I could excel in, a job I could keep.***

## **Vocational Assessment**

We asked transition-age consumers how VRS learned about them, and if they thought VRS understood them and what they wanted to do, to begin a discussion with the transition-age consumers about what they knew about vocational assessments.

The transition-age consumers' recollections of testing were varied. Some recalled interest or career inventories; others recalled basic skills or accuracy and dexterity assessments. Sometimes educators had administered the inventories or assessments; these transition-age consumers were split on whether they thought results were shared with VRS counselors. Some did not recall testing but did recall conversations with counselors about their career interests. Some had no recollection of any assessment of any kind.

***I think testing helped me. I had an idea of what I wanted to do already, but it gave me more of an idea.***

***I think they handed us a piece of paper with our score on it and whatever else that said what our career was going to be in. That's all I remember.***

Transition-age consumer satisfaction wasn't premised simply on whether or not assessment took place. Some who had no testing were satisfied as they already had a career direction in mind. Some who did have testing were unsatisfied if the test results were out of sync with their own thoughts. And some transition-age consumers who initially expressed satisfaction later appeared dissatisfied as conversation continued and they heard others describe assistance they were never offered. A few transition-age consumers who entered a focus group feeling satisfied about their level of service went home feeling dissatisfied after hearing about other consumer experiences.

***They were very understanding of my situation and any help that I needed.***

For transition-age consumers who already had a preferred career direction, the issue was not as much whether testing supported their direction, but rather how the counselor handled the situation. One transition-age consumer found that testing did not support her career preference but appreciated that the counselor took time to talk this through with her and her mother, and that the counselor ultimately supported her as she pursued her original choice. Another transition-age consumer was bitter.

***I talked with her about something else I thought I could go into and she's like "you've never done that." I sat there and told her, "how do you know, you don't know how I've lived and you don't know if I've experienced that."***

He thought that a counselor narrowly interpreted his test results and the counselor refused to support the transition-age consumer's desire to explore another field.

***I was very angry because she could have explained that it was something we can at least check into and see what it entails, but it seemed to be shot down right away. It wasn't something she wasn't going to consider to help me look into. I had some idea of what I was interested in, but that didn't necessarily correlate with the test and the person I worked with seemed to shoot down my ideas.***

For those with a preferred career direction, a critical satisfaction measure was how the counselor interpreted the test results and how the counselor used the results – a guide versus a rule – in further exploring career interests. Counselors could seem to be either advisory or commanding.

***It was a lot of discussion and I felt that my counselor got to know me really well and I think that he was a really nice person. He asked a lot of questions and he made me feel that he really cared.***

Some transition-age consumers did not have a career direction, and were concerned about a lack of any assessment, through either testing or conversation. They sometimes acknowledged that it did not seem like a problem at the time. It was later, when they found themselves floundering, that they came to think that earlier testing or probing might have helped them. A number of these transition-age consumers saw themselves as being too-old or closed-cases and unable to return to VRS for more help. What was important in either case was that the VRS counselor questioned them about their plans.

Transition-age consumers who did not have a career direction were happy when counselors helped them by encouraging interim goals. A college student was counseled to concentrate on required courses for the first two years and worry about a major later.

***They were pretty much supportive of anything; do what you want.  
They wanted to make sure what you do, you've got to finish it  
because you just can't stop in the middle and go to the next thing.***

Another transition-age consumer was encouraged to take a low-level job simply to develop basic work skills, but to remember that the job was not a final goal. The most dissatisfied transition-age consumers were the ones who said they were encouraged to take general coursework or take a low-level job, and then felt abandoned or written off by their counselors.

***They had no sense of what I wanted. I think it was like "Oh, he's a kid, just throw him in college. He can find his way."***

***They just wanted to put me in a job, whatever they can put me in. At the time, I didn't mind. I didn't really care. I just wanted money.***

## **Career Exploration**

We asked transition-age consumers how they looked at school options or workplace options and how VRS was involved in those searches.

***If she couldn't help out, she would let you know right away, or find another option around it.***

In general, transition-age consumers who had a good idea of what they wanted, and who were able to do much of their own searching of career fields or schools, expressed the most satisfaction with VRS. Their counselors participated with them at a level and in ways the transition-age consumers considered appropriate but that did not always mean a lot of help.

***She worked with my special ed teacher and talked to the high school principal about it too, to see if it would be okay if I leave school for awhile to go out and do a job to earn some credits. I liked it because that's the experience I needed.***

Numerous transition-age consumers saw school or career selection as something they worked out on their own or with others such as family or teachers, and they had no expectation of counselor help in that area. An example of an appreciated counselor is one who strongly suggested a field that had been identified in career testing. When the transition-age consumer preferred a field suggested by her mother, the transition-age consumer was satisfied that although the counselor disagreed, the counselor supported the transition-age consumer's decision.

Satisfied transition-age consumers often noted three things about their counselors. First, the counselors were encouraging, urging them to move forward. Second, their counselors were cautionary, challenging or questioning them to think more deeply about their choices, without outright rejecting those choices. Following further review, some transition-age consumers changed their minds about their career choices, while the ones who stayed with their choices appreciated that the counselors continued to support their direction. Third, these counselors often interacted with high school educators, college staff, potential employers or other supports such as social workers.

***She gave me a bunch of names, people I could talk to at the jobsites. She gave me the names off her computer and I started calling them and doing phone interviews with her there giving me pointers on stuff. Five dealerships I've talked to; two are willing to help me right now.***

Most often the focus group consumers expressed satisfaction with the help they received in determining career options, but when there was dissatisfaction, it was bitter. Transition-age consumers described counselors who refused to consider the consumer's preferences.

***I kind of understood the thought process. I felt like I had to prove to him that this was actually what I wanted to do. But I felt it was me saying this is actually what I wanted to do, versus him trying to deter me from it.***

Transition-age consumers contended that counselors either did not listen to them, or rejected their ideas without apparent good reason.

***He knows I'm looking for a job but it's like I'm not getting any help at all. It's more like I'm just sitting on the backburner right now; he's giving up on me and I'm looking for a job myself...***

For example, a transition-age consumer claimed her counselor refused to consider her interest in interpreter skills, saying her obesity would make her physically unable to sign for any length of time. Transition-age consumers whose preferences were not explored were among those who said they did not think counselors understood their interests or desires.

*I almost don't even want to see her anymore because I tried to explain how I was feeling but I don't think I was getting across well enough. So we kind of distanced our meetings few and far between and kind of faded away from that.*

Transition-age consumers were not asked to identify their counselors but in some settings it was learned that several participants had the same counselor. They generally tended to be satisfied with the amount of help they wanted at the time which, with the same counselor, could vary from hands-off to a counselor-led visit to a prospective school or worksite. At times in conversation, it appeared that how much help a transition-age consumer received often depended on how much they asked for, but not necessarily on how much the transition-age consumer thought was needed. An apparent conclusion was that self-advocacy made a real difference in service levels, even with highly-rated counselors. How much help a transition-age consumer received often depended on the consumer's understanding of what they could ask for.

Some transition-age consumers who acknowledged they didn't have a strong sense of direction said they were encouraged to take a job, almost any job. Among these transition-age consumers, two very different messages were reported. Some were encouraged to view this as a starting point to build basic skills or to develop some excitement about work before moving to a higher or more desired position. Others said they felt they were given any job to get themselves off the list, and that they weren't encouraged to later find something more fulfilling.

Some transition-age consumers said they had considered self employment because they have family members or friends who are self-employed. Typically the possibility of self-employment was not raised by either transition-age consumers or counselors. When transition-age consumers did raise the idea, counselors suggested a one-step-at-a-time approach, recommending that basic skills (such as auto mechanic training) be learned first. This can viewed as sage advice, and counselors did not reject the notion of self-employment, but it also was apparent that transition-age consumers were not advised to explore small business training at the same time they were learning basic skills.

Transition-age consumers reported varied experiences in trying to communicate with counselors. When trying to get in contact, some were pleased with quick responses while others said they felt rejected by no response. Those who did not request meetings or phone calls tended to have much less contact. Among those who requested and received contact, a number said that counselors made it clear that they were very busy. Transition-age consumers found this understandable and presumed the counselor must have many similar clients, and knowing that the counselor was busy led them to request less contact.

### **Employment Plan**

Transition-age consumers were asked if they remembered making a plan with VRS, who was involved in the process, and what they thought of the plan.



***It was basically an individual thing; that I agree on this, what I was going to do, so I knew exactly what to tell her. I had to do my part.***

***The plan was a lot of help because after I graduated from high school, if I wouldn't have had someone help me out with the plan, I would have probably put off college until I decided what I wanted to do. I was glad she said that "while you are deciding, you can take general requirement courses."***

Very few transition-age consumers had full recollection of the Employment Plan. Many did not remember working on it, and some had it confused with their IEP plans; very few recalled exactly what the plan contained.

### **What Plan?**

While this might seem like a harsh criticism, it didn't seem that way to the consumers. Most of them recalled conversations with counselors in which expectations – in both directions – were discussed.

***When they explained the plan it was like when you're a little kid and they tell you how to do stuff, just dumb it down some more. I want to be told straight up, hey, this is the plan.***

This is one topic in which location made a marked difference: transition-age consumers in Mankato mostly recalled their plans while transition-age consumers elsewhere mostly did not.

Satisfaction with the Employment Plan was often expressed as satisfaction with the ability to contact counselors for further advice or assistance. It did not matter to transition-age consumers if they were not sure what was in their plan if they felt free to call a counselor and discuss it. If transition-age consumers did not feel free to call their counselor, they were more likely to worry. Where this possibly made the biggest difference is in confusion about whether the plan was a one-time-only event or something open to revision, whether the plan had a firm deadline or a changeable deadline. Transition-age consumers who felt they had an open door with their counselor were not so concerned about the plan.

***She asked you if you wanted to go to school or were you planning to get a job right away and you told her what you wanted to do. Then you hear from her a few months later, "How's it going," and making sure you got the stuff you need. That's pretty much it.***

Those who did not feel they had an open door were more confused and uncertain about what options were available to them. In turn, those who seemed most uncertain about their plan timetables expressed the least likelihood of initiating more contact with their counselors.

Similarly, those transition-age consumers who expected to be in ongoing contact with a counselor felt more of a commitment to keeping their part of the plan. For

example, not wanting to tell a counselor about poor grades was an incentive to work harder in school.

***Every so often we'd meet; we reviewed the plan to see if there's anything we can add to it to make it better. I think it tells me exactly what they are going to do. They're doing well, a very good job so far. And I need to keep a 2.0 GPA and just to meet with them every so often to discuss how things are going.***

Some transition-age consumers who recalled plans expressed frustration with the process, either because they had difficulty organizing their thoughts, or because they recalled the process as belittling. Others who were satisfied with the planning process thought the rules of the game were somewhat unfair to them because they attended private colleges and they didn't receive as much assistance as they think they would have received if they had attended public colleges.

### **Self-Awareness and Self-Advocacy**

Talking about outcomes or the results of their services, transition-age consumers were asked how VRS has helped them in understanding their situation and their ability to advocate for themselves.

***I wish I could address my special needs to a person, like try to tell them that I am suffering from anxiety so they could tell me it's not a big deal and try to relax – help me out. I feel terrible because they don't know that I am suffering from fear and anxiety.***

The topic was introduced gently by noting that each one has personal needs, yet transition-age consumers were generally comfortable identifying their disabilities and discussing their understanding of their situation, and their capacity for advocacy for themselves around work-related concerns, such as reasonable accommodations for a disability.

***She [VRS counselor] told me a couple times, it seems you have the initiative; that you know what you want to do. I'll help you if you need it; give me a call.***

Regardless of whether transition-age consumers thought they understood what they needed to reach their goals, and regardless of whether they felt they could speak on their own behalf, few transition-age consumers saw this as a responsibility of VRS. They more readily identified their personal make-up, their family's role, and school-related staff as having the most impact, generally before even meeting anyone from VRS. In this discussion, transition-age consumers confirmed a primary importance of parents in their development. This is notable because at the same time some transition-age consumers tended to not fully involve their parents in their dealings with VRS.

***Asking for help, that's a big one. I like to be independent and just do things on my own, but usually if I need something I'll ask my counselor and she doesn't make me scared to ask. It's kind of like if you were going to be shot down, she wouldn't. She accepts you.***

Some did identify ways in which VRS helped, directly or indirectly, to support their development. Some saw VRS as building their desire to succeed through the experience of visiting schools or job shadowing, as well as by providing funding for school. Sometimes when students weren't ready to explain disability-related concerns with a potential employer, counselors spoke on their behalf. Those transition-age consumers who had ongoing contact with counselors saw those conversations as helping to build their awareness and capacity.

***Rehab Services helped a lot because they expect me to do well. I have to do well if I want to continue receiving this help. That gives me an extra push to do well. I don't have an option of doing poorly today – I have to go and I have to do this. So I think in that way it helped [with self-advocacy].***

Most transition-age consumers emphasized that they were very much aware of their disability and how it affected their lives. One with cognitive disabilities noted that in difficult conversations, he thinks “This is your disability talking; calm down.” Many described how understanding their disability affected their career search. For example, one with ADHD described seeking work with more short-term activities rather than fewer longer-term activities.

The ability to self-advocate was described in mixed terms. Some acknowledged having no ability; others described situations that demonstrated successful self-advocacy. Others were somewhere in between, such as a transition-age consumer who insisted that she could self-advocate as long as she could do it anonymously. A reoccurring response was that transition-age consumers were able to self-advocate but chose not to do so. Very few of the transition-age consumers in the focus groups had visibly apparent disabilities; most of them had cognitive-related diagnoses. Often they were dealing with direct supervisors or instructors not aware of their situation and they chose not to acknowledge the disability because of the risk of perceived humiliation from co-workers or classmates. Some made it clear they had been through demeaning experiences before and did not want that to happen again.

There were correlations apparent across the focus groups: those transition-age consumers who identified themselves as competent self-advocates tended to be the same transition-age consumers most satisfied with the level of support they received from counselors, both in resources and communication. Those who expressed the least self-advocacy skills tended to be the same transition-age consumers expressing the least career direction.

## **Satisfaction**

***I think they helped me grow into a more mature adult just because they helped push me, and with their expectations.***

In general, transition-age consumers were very satisfied with their experience with VRS. They continually remarked at the high level of personal attention they received from VRS staff, especially their VRS counselor. When not satisfied with a particular counselor, they described being able to change to a different counselor, although it was easier for some than for others, depending on a particular office. In practically every case, satisfaction was strongly related to personal attention. Transition-age consumers may have had different opinions on specific issues of their cases, but the personal attention they perceived receiving from their counselor was the principal criterion of their level of satisfaction.

## **Parents**

### **Understanding Vocational Rehabilitation Services**

***I wish I understood the whole program. I only know bits and pieces of it.***

Parents were asked to remember when they first were introduced to VRS, what they thought VRS would do, and who else was involved in the VRS connection.

***I learned about it from a really, really good high school counselor and I also had the feeling it was a well kept secret. I remember the high school counselor saying, well, we're not supposed to promote this.***

***He (VRS) was part of the IEP meeting and it gave him a chance to know about my son and apply what he knew to his situation. I thought it was really good. But (VRS) it's a well kept secret.***

Parents of transition-age consumers were better than consumers at understanding the distinctive identity of VRS, and collectively were familiar with practically all of the agency names, even the historical ones. But at the time of their initial contact, there was a lot of confusion, much of it because connection could be through a transition program, such as Transitions Plus or VECTOR, and parents did not always notice a clear boundary between VRS and the other programs.

Sometimes parents perceived that the transition program had the primary role of helping their children with employment with VRS in a secondary, supportive role. At other times it seemed VRS had the lead. Parents noted that with so many programs and agencies being involved in their children's lives, it is not always clear who or what is under the same umbrella; sorting out distinctions comes with time.

Although they realize it is not part of VRS, a number of parents wanted to comment on the transition programs. While programs were often complimented, one

repeated complaint was that transition programs had no consumer focus and seemed intent on simply putting their children into any employment, regardless of appropriateness. One parent saw an unintended benefit to this approach: by being exposed to many broom-sweeping jobs, her child learned what he did not want in his career. Some parents complained that transition programs placed transition-age consumers in volunteer roles even though earning money is important to transition-age consumers. Other parents said the programs had no interest in helping with work placements and viewed it as the transition-age consumers' responsibility.

The relationships between high schools and VRS stretched across the length of a broad spectrum. For every high school where staff introduced VRS to parents, there was a high school that did not. In at least one situation, it was a parent who introduced VRS to the high school transition staff who seemed unaware of its existence. Another parent recounted that a teacher confidentially told her about VRS while saying she was not supposed to do so. And a parent who learned about VRS outside of school said that none of the other transition students in her son's high school had, or have, any VRS involvement.

When parents were introduced to VRS at high school, it typically happened at IEP meetings. Sometimes this happened in the children's senior year. While parents were appreciative, they wished the introduction had come earlier because their children often are resistant and it can take two years to get to know them. Those parents suggested that if introduction had come earlier, it might have resulted in fewer inappropriate school or goal recommendations.

In the course of describing high schools and transition programs, some parents noted they had switched schools through open enrollment because they discovered that school districts varied greatly in what they offered. This disturbed them as they contended any statewide program should have minimum standards. It should be noted that these discussions came early in the focus group, and almost immediately parents were eagerly seeking and sharing information with each other. This continued throughout the focus group sessions and after the session as well.

When discussing initial VRS contacts, counselors often were described as nice, even wonderful, particularly compared to transition program staff. Bad experiences with two counselors who did not make promised follow-up contacts were remembered, long after the fact, with detail.

***She (VRS) came to the house and was wonderful and got our hopes all up and I called her four or five times, left messages and she never called back. This is after a two hour meeting. Never heard back from her. Oh, I was furious. My son was with me and she got him all excited with the job that might be out there.***

***Our first contact with Rehabilitation Services was extremely negative. We did not have cooperation from the counselor; it was more of “here, this is what you have to do. Here, sign this, do this, do that. It was almost overwhelming, especially for my daughter. It was difficult to get it accomplished, but we got another counselor and from day one she made a connection with our daughter, which is so very, very critical. It was really neat that we had somebody that was an advocate for our daughter. It’s been going well since.***

A few who had multiple counselors felt that hampered them in learning the system, but ones who worked with one counselor did not have that problem. A more frequently noted problem was that some parents didn’t have an opportunity to work with the counselors, who met only with their children. The transition-age consumers were at least 18 and did not approve joint meetings or share much with their parents.

***The transition ends when he’s 21, but she’s (VRS) there on a consultant basis and I like having that. She just seems like she cares.***

When parents first met VRS, they saw the agency as offering possibilities, a new range of choices, and as the offer of hope.

***She came to our house. It’s good to get into the house because you can see a great deal of the dynamics going on.***

With their children about to leave the school system, VRS appeared as a new potential lifeline or connection. All parents said they looked to VRS for help with tuition or employment. Parents in rural areas also noted that getting a computer was an enticement. They emphasized it was not a matter of greed but of need. They viewed computers as an essential communication device for those with certain disabilities, including hearing impairments. They also said it was necessary for continuing education as schools have required online processes.

### **Vocational Assessment**

***When he took the tests he wasn’t interested in what the tests said, so they wouldn’t help him. What do you say to a kid who struggled all his life and has a dream – do you say forget it or go for it?***

Parents were asked how VRS learned about their children, and if they thought VRS understood their children and what their children wanted to do.

Parents were not always aware of formal efforts at vocational assessment, and varied greatly in whether or not they thought counselors understood their children, both their interests and their needs. At one location, parents overwhelmingly thought they did, and at another they overwhelmingly thought they did not. But the responses had much more variety than a simple yes or no.

In terms of their children’s interests, examples were given of counselors who made great effort, or very little effort, to know what the consumers wanted. It was this

effort that also seemed to predict how satisfied parents would be. When counselors made the effort, when they demonstrated a personal interest, parents were very quick to notice.

Parents noted that the children themselves did not know in what they were interested or that the children frequently changed their minds and moved on to something. In short, parents said that counselors often don't understand the transition-age consumer's interests because the transition-age consumer doesn't understand either. Parents acknowledged that counselors need time in order to get to know the transition-age consumers. Some parents said their counselors were successful because they had two years to get to know the transition-age consumer. There was a caution that having initial contact in a transition-age consumer's senior year might be too late to start.

In terms of their children's needs, there were varied positive examples. One parent said that unlike other service providers working with a consumer, his son's counselor recognized that his mental disabilities were as important to address as his physical disabilities in seeking employment.

***This is the first time I really felt that somebody was on his side, that yeah, he can get a job, he can be successful.***

Another counselor understood that some hard-of-hearing transition-age consumers require quiet settings and advocated accordingly. And another counselor took time to research a transition-age consumer's rare disability in order to help appropriately. This portion of the conversation showed a difference between transition-age consumer and parent responses. Transition-age consumers tended to identify caring counselors as ones who offered encouragement, while parents tended to identify caring counselors as ones who made an effort to understand their child's unique situation.

***It started with monthly meetings and gradually lengthened out. She knows our daughter inside and out. She really does; she's taken time and she has asked the right questions and dealt with our daughter on an individual basis, through us, to thoroughly understand what our daughter wants to do.***

Nevertheless, it was the caring counselors who evoked satisfaction. Satisfied parents could overlook lack of understanding if the counselor demonstrated caring or concern, but were not apt to be satisfied if a counselor was aloof, or did not seem to care, no matter how well an understanding of the consumer he /she developed.

Parents recollections of vocational assessments done through VRS were not completely blank, but more typically assessments were conducted by secondary schools, postsecondary schools, or came through transition programs. There was a concern that test results done elsewhere might not have been shared with VRS, but not much concern about a lack of testing.

***They did an assessment on my daughter. They listened, asked questions, but never followed through.***

Closely related to their preference of concern, parents expressed a sense that interviews and conversations were as good as or better than, formal assessments to gain an understanding of the consumer's interests and skills. Further, there sometimes was a concern that assessment results could be misinterpreted or serve as an inadequate replacement for really getting to know the consumer.

***Our interview process was wonderful. Both times they listened to my son. It was a brainstorm session with myself, the social worker and the Voc Rehab worker the first time, and I thought she really got it, and they brought up some great ideas that I had not thought about. And the second time it was also with the school people and we still came up with new ideas and I was very impressed with that. My son was excited about both of them and it makes him feel proud like, "Yeah, I could do this; I could go into this type of setting."***

Some parents accepted but were disappointed in not knowing how the assessment process, as well as the career option planning, was conducted as they were not included in the conversations. Others, who noted that their children, to an extent, had come to rely upon parents to speak on their behalf, considered it a valuable exercise for the transition-age consumer to meet alone with a counselor. It was seen as a step in developing self-expression and self-advocacy skills.

### **Career Exploration**

***Ultimately the kids are empowered because the kids are able to participate and to me that's probably the best service of all.***

Parents were asked how transition-age consumers looked at school options or workplace options and how VRS was involved in those searches.

***But to go through the steps, for a lot of our kids they don't know the steps. They have no idea and that creates unreal expectations.***

***The counselor said I don't know you yet, but I want you to tell me about you, what you want, what do you need and when you go into these jobs, what do you need to do a good job. You go home and think about it. That is their track.***

Parents of transition-age consumers interested in going to college typically saw it as their responsibility to help their child select a school. After they helped their child research options, they would consult VRS about financial assistance. Parents appreciated related help, such as counselors accompanying their children on visits to campuses or helping with registration or course enrollment.

Some parents said their children wanted very much to attend college although they weren't capable of completing degree-level programs. They appreciated VRS counselors helping with certificate or other non-degree programs located on college



campuses, as it not only provided good training but also satisfied transition-age consumer desires and bolstered their children's self-esteem.

Parents, similar to transition-age consumers in other focus groups, expressed confusion regarding the role of VRS. They were not sure whether VRS was supposed to help college students in finding summer jobs. One noted that a counselor is only trying to find summer work at Goodwill for a transition-age consumer capable of graduate-level studies. More often, parents complained that VRS did not help with finding any summer job. Those parents were concerned because they viewed summer jobs as an important part of career exploration, and sometimes because maintaining summer activity was important in addressing their child's disability.

Parents of transition-age consumers interested in career exploration or in simply being employed were most satisfied with VRS if their child had a variety of short-term work experiences giving them a hands-on understanding of different fields.

A transition-age consumer who had a garden job ended up taking horticulture classes; another who worked in auto dismantling learned he hated any job that got his hands dirty. They were dissatisfied when a series of experiences were nothing but different cleaning jobs. They were most dissatisfied when a counselor was hands-off, saying there was nothing to be done as long as the transition-age consumer was undecided. This caused some parents to seek out career exploration courses at local colleges on their own.

Some parents receiving the best help in career exploration from community rehabilitation programs. Some parents were aware that the work was done under contract from VRS, and they give credit to both agencies.

Many of the parents communicated a sense of frustration because they wanted to do more – and continue to want to do more – to help their children with career exploration, but they did not know what resources they could turn to for ideas, suggestions and alternatives.

***I think the hardest thing for parents is finding resources. There is no central place to find resources. "This county had this and we heard about this." Why isn't it just the same, or somewhere to find this out?***

They expressed frustration because they realized that not all programs offered the same level of help, but there was no resource that enabled them to compare programs. In the focus groups, when parents noted things that helped them, other parents asked them to repeat it and wrote it down. After the focus groups ended, parents often continued sharing ideas. While some of them noted they had been in support groups years before, those support groups typically were centered on the issues of a particular disability. None of them had experienced a support group centered on the issues of career exploration or employment.

When describing the role of VRS counselors, some parents also described the role and value of county social workers, which varied from case to case. A number of parents said they know numerous other parents of children with disabilities who likely

could use social work help, but have never been connected to county programs. One parent said she sought out a social worker when her son was 18 and that no one had ever suggested the resource to her.

### **Employment Plan**

***I thought the plan was really good because it really coordinated everything she had to do. My daughter said what she liked about the plan was that it gave her exactly what she had to do. It was structured, so there was no guesswork about it. It was her choice, she wanted it.***

Parents were asked if they remembered making a plan with VRS, who was involved in the process, and what they thought of the plan.

***I thought the plan was appropriate for our situation. I was glad because with his hearing loss, if he's in a loud environment he may not hear instructions. I was glad they were willing to help employers too, that if he got a job or had an interview and an employer knew they could get some kind of equipment to help him do his job better, that the state may help get that for him, they may actually hire him.***

About half of the parents in focus groups did not recall a plan made with VRS. In a few cases, parents suspected their children may have excluded them from the process or didn't think to inform them. Parents who made a point of reviewing their files to prepare for the focus group said they simply had no awareness of a plan. In some cases a parent brought a file folder, or several file folders containing many of the forms and related correspondence for their child. Although they were not highly aware of the Employment Plan, it was often in their file folder. However, most parents saw the relationship with VRS as an ongoing verbal dialogue, and were not highly concerned about the plan.

***I sense that she (VRS) is there. She's on-call. I mean, she's definitely a resource and it feels good to have her.***

They were often unaware of its prescriptive nature when asking about services for their child.

To the extent that the plan represented a contractual agreement with VRS, some parents were concerned about what would happen if their child did not keep their part of the bargain.

***We've had to ask for a lot of things because if you fall quiet and stop asking, then it stops, so it's the advocacy thing. I think it's in the asking. If you come to any person whining or complaining, would you be listened to as a person who comes across positively? If you say "Hey, this really worked out last time and maybe we can tweak it a little bit, you know, can we move forward on this?"***

They wondered what would transpire if their child were to fail a college course or drop out of any kind of program. Would that transition-age consumer be banned from any future help from VRS? This was a fear for parents who said their children did not fully comprehend the concept of employment, and for parents whose children were not doing well – perhaps going through a rough semester – and they did not know who to ask about it.

A related fear was that plans are usually for a certain duration such as one year or four years. What happens at the end of that time, especially if a child needs more than four years to graduate? There is a great amount of uncertainty as to how much plans can be extended or revised, and again parents were not sure who to ask about it.

Beyond those very real fears, parents saw the plans as a good thing as it keeps transition-age consumers stimulated, and it stimulates parents as well to keep working at it in order to keep getting needed help.

***What was good about the plan is that they are going to work with him through his disability so he can present himself in an interview. The goal is they don't want to be sitting there holding his hand; they want him to be able to walk in there and present himself for who he is.***

Although a number of parents said that the plans had failed, they said the breakdown was in communication between the counselors and service agencies. They were satisfied with the planning process between the counselors and the transition-age consumers.

***First, I think the plan is realistic. Second, it was solicited from my daughter. This is important that she's heard, and that her wishes and desires and things in the future come from her. The counselor was very gentle with her in how she said "that might not be realistic." But then she said "let's see if we can come up with more options that are a little more realistic for you." She was receptive to that.***

Several suggestions were given for improving the plan process. One was to always include soft skills along with training programs. For example, a counselor talked to a transition-age consumer's instructors to learn her strengths and weaknesses, and took that into account in the plan. Another suggestion is to require semester midstream check-ins, so that counselors are forewarned if transition-age consumers are not doing well in school. And another suggestion is to build parental contact into the plan so that parents of 18-and-older transition-age consumers are part of the process.

Some parents had relocated after the inception of services and commented upon the lack of uniformity between VRS counseling teams in different areas.

***It just seems like since this is a statewide program, each county should offer the same thing.***

Parents believe they need to be part of the process, because how much help their children receive depends, to varying extents, on much the parent is involved in asking and advocating on their behalf. Some have acquired skills on how to deal more effectively with counselors and would like to have an opportunity to share those skills with other parents.

***I think the employment plan can't be static, it has to be dynamic.  
Which means Voc Rehab has to be part of that dynamic?***

### **Self-Awareness and Self-Advocacy**

Parents were asked how VRS has helped their children in understanding their situation and their ability to self-advocate.

Some parents believe their children accurately understood of their disabilities. They thought they were aware of their strengths and weaknesses. For example, one transition-age consumer asks not to have to write things because she can barely spell yet she knows she's good at leading groups. Parents who believed their children did not have a good understanding made references to not comprehending their limitations. Parents also noted that they have concerns about their own understanding of their children's disabilities. Parents sought a balance between acknowledging reality without selling their children short.

By and large, parents did not expect developing self-awareness and advocacy skills as a primary responsibility of VRS. They appreciated the encouragement and sense of optimism that counselors conveyed because they found most of the people in the system to be discouraging.

***Rehab Services has given me more peace of mind that there are options out there. We might not know where he's going to fit yet, but we are going to figure it out.***

Some of the optimism that counselors contributed came from increasing the range of options for the transition-age consumers.

Some parents did not expect that their children being able to advocate for themselves. They thought the inability was a characteristic or a consequence of the child's disability, and believed that no amount of encouragement or confidence-building activities would change that.

***He's scared and yet he wants to move on and his high school teachers were always so encouraging of him and I've always been encouraging of him, and he's experienced discouragement and hit some bumps. It's hard to know how much optimism you should give a child. I mean, even us. My mother said that you can do anything.***

***When are you going to realize her limitations and not push her so hard that you put her under this pressure, when she can only read at a third grade level. When are you going to accept that she can only do this much and let her be happy at this much?***

Other parents believed that their children could advocate for themselves but choose not to. This would occur for transition-age consumers who found jobs on their own, and desired to hide the disability from employers.

***My children don't advocate for themselves because they are not going to bring attention to themselves at all. It's a heartbreaking thing. It's very hard to teach our children that they have this right because if they do it, they're bringing attention to themselves.***

Parents suggested that, VRS can and does help transition-age consumers. Encouragement is important to many, along with projecting a sense of optimism. In helping with basic interviewing skills, VRS builds comfort in simply speaking with employers, and introduces transition-age consumers to being proactive. Counselors serve as role models when transition-age consumers see them act on their behalf, and they keep self-advocacy issues alive by dropping in regularly and asking how things are going. An important help is placing transition-age consumers in settings where they have a good chance to succeed. While these things can be important, parents tend not to readily connect VRS with helping build self-awareness and self-advocacy.

### **Satisfaction**

***I would say that instead of Voc Rehab helping the kids understand their disability better, I would say I prefer that the counselor not necessarily put that lens of disability over my child in the sense of labeling them. I would rather have them get to know my child and build the trusting relationship with them because they are a significant, important part of this team, this process.***

***I think a counselor should be calling or dropping in, just asking the question: "Is everything okay? Is there an area we can make work with her if it's not quite where it should be? Because we could provide that support for her." I just don't think enough of that happens.***

Satisfaction for parents was, just as for transition-age consumers, the result of the personal interest and attention VRS staff, especially counselors, provided transition-age consumers.

***We had the last IEP meeting, all these adults and they are saying no. I remember the Voc Rehab person leaving the meeting, she goes, "I'll find him something." She put her hand on my shoulder because it was a scary meeting. It was. And she was encouraging. She said we'll find him something. And that was telling me she wasn't going to give up.***

***If a kid got a job now, Voc Rehab will check back and say “Are you happy here? You want to move on? Should we expand your horizons?”***

Differences of opinion on vocational assessment, career exploration or Employment Plan development notwithstanding, parents expressed satisfaction when they thought the counselor was personally interested in their child, and parents continually remarked that VRS counselors seemed very dedicated to their work with their child.

***The last time we met with her counselor she so encouraged her. She told her she was so proud of her and it was all right for her to seek help. She made her feel good about herself and at the same time said, “Okay, you’ve got to seek help if you need help; its all right to be able to seek that help out.”***

Parents were also more apt than their children to express dissatisfaction with a counselor and request a change. For the most part, they reported being successful at receiving a change of counselors and being satisfied with the change.

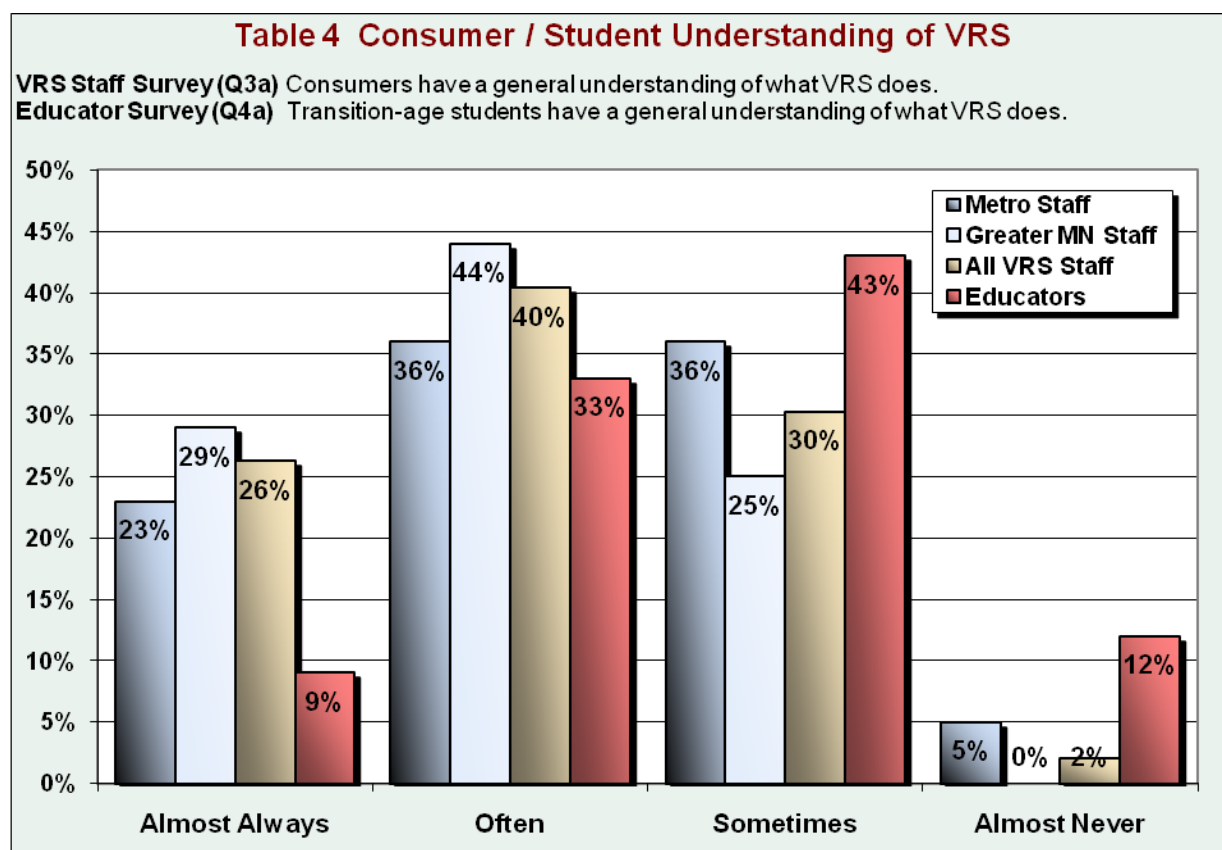
## **VRS Staff and Educators**

### **Understanding VRS**

VRS staff and educators were asked about transition-age consumer/student understanding of VRS, the involvement of VRS staff in the IEP and VRS orientation processes, and about communications and coordination between them (VRS staff and educators) during the time transition-age consumers/students are developing an understanding of VRS.

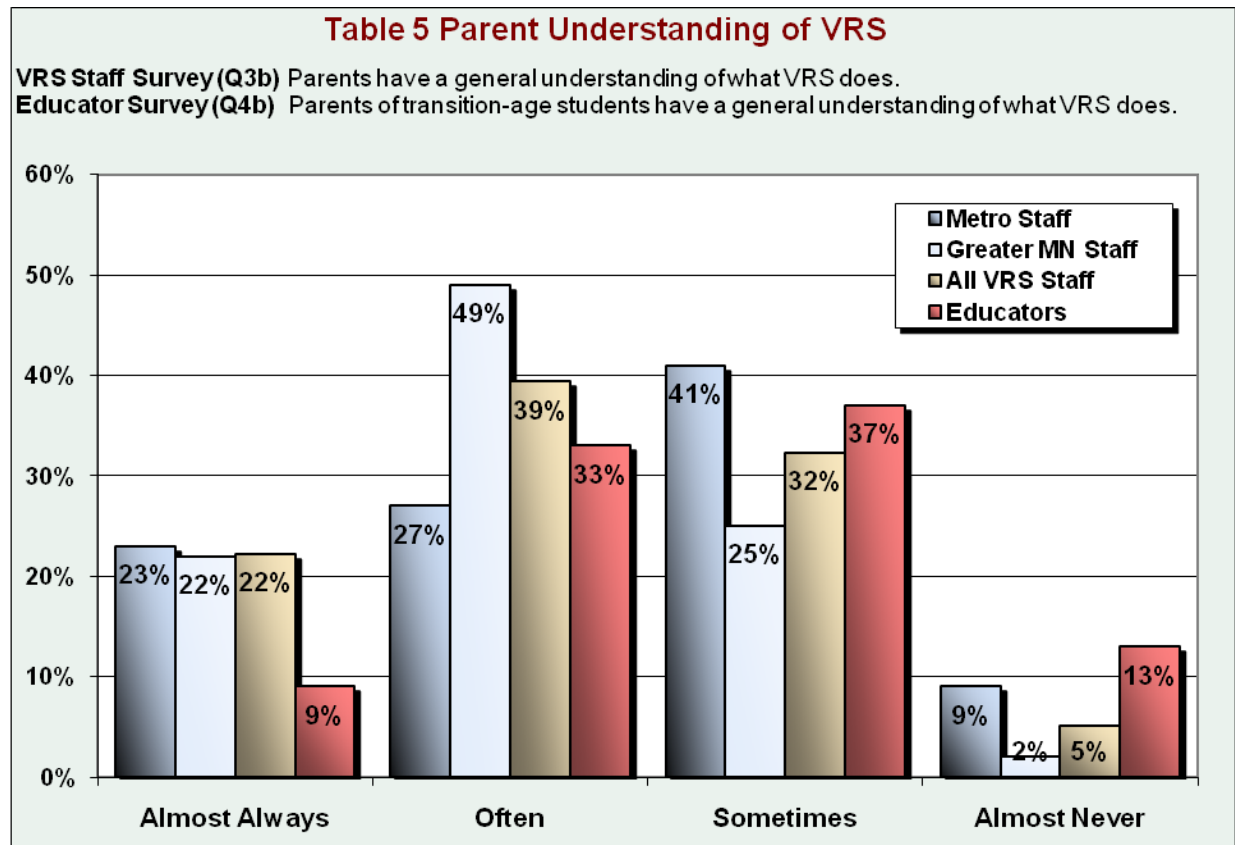
## Consumer / Student Understanding of VRS

What does VRS do? We asked VRS staff and educators how often consumers/students and parents have a general understanding of the VRS program. Table 4 indicates that *Almost Always* or *Often* 69% of VRS staff and 42% of the educators responded that transition-age consumers/students had a general understanding of what VRS does.



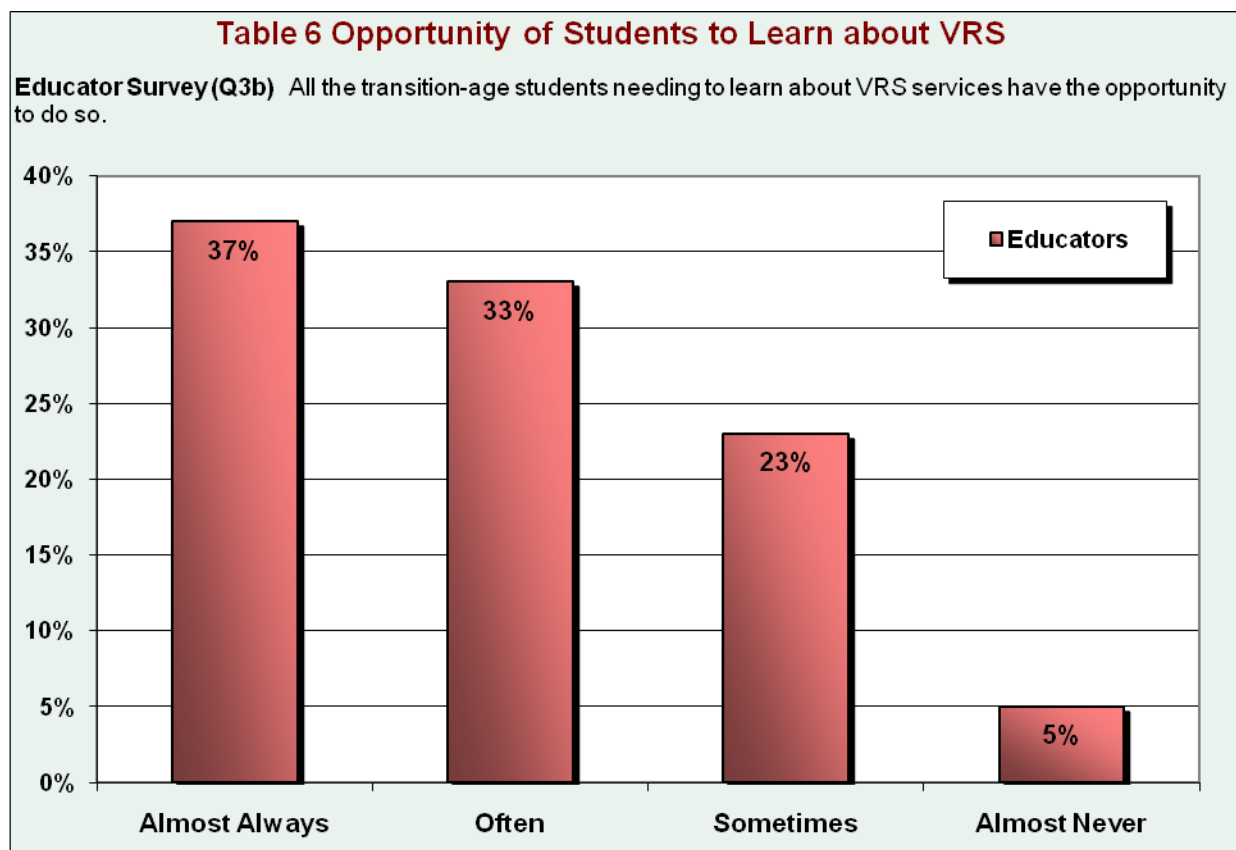
*VRS staff: I believe the strongest part of the orientation is explaining to the client what RS is all about. What we can and sometimes cannot do for them. I also think just explaining step by step the procedures we follow to help them get to the point of successful employment and the follow up or agency provides to them in a way they can understand is critical. I think it is important, during orientation that each client understand the need to keep in touch, be aware of contact information, such as an address change, phone number change, etc. is critical so we don't lose touch. Communication is successful for a successful closure.*

Table 5 indicates that slightly lower proportions responded that *Almost Always* or *Often* parents had that same general understanding as transition-age consumers/students.





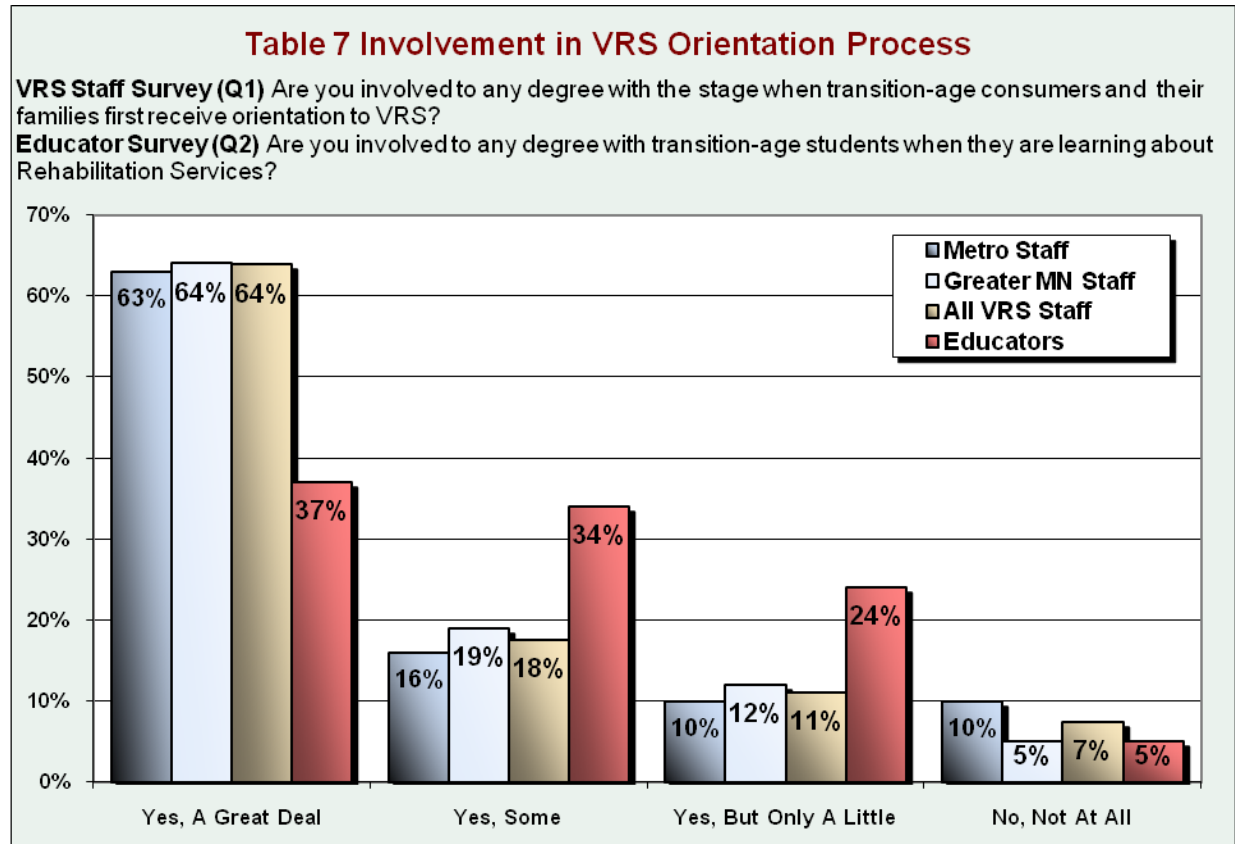
Do students who need to be learning about VRS have that opportunity? Table 6 indicates that 70% of the educators thought that occurred *Almost Always* or *Often*.



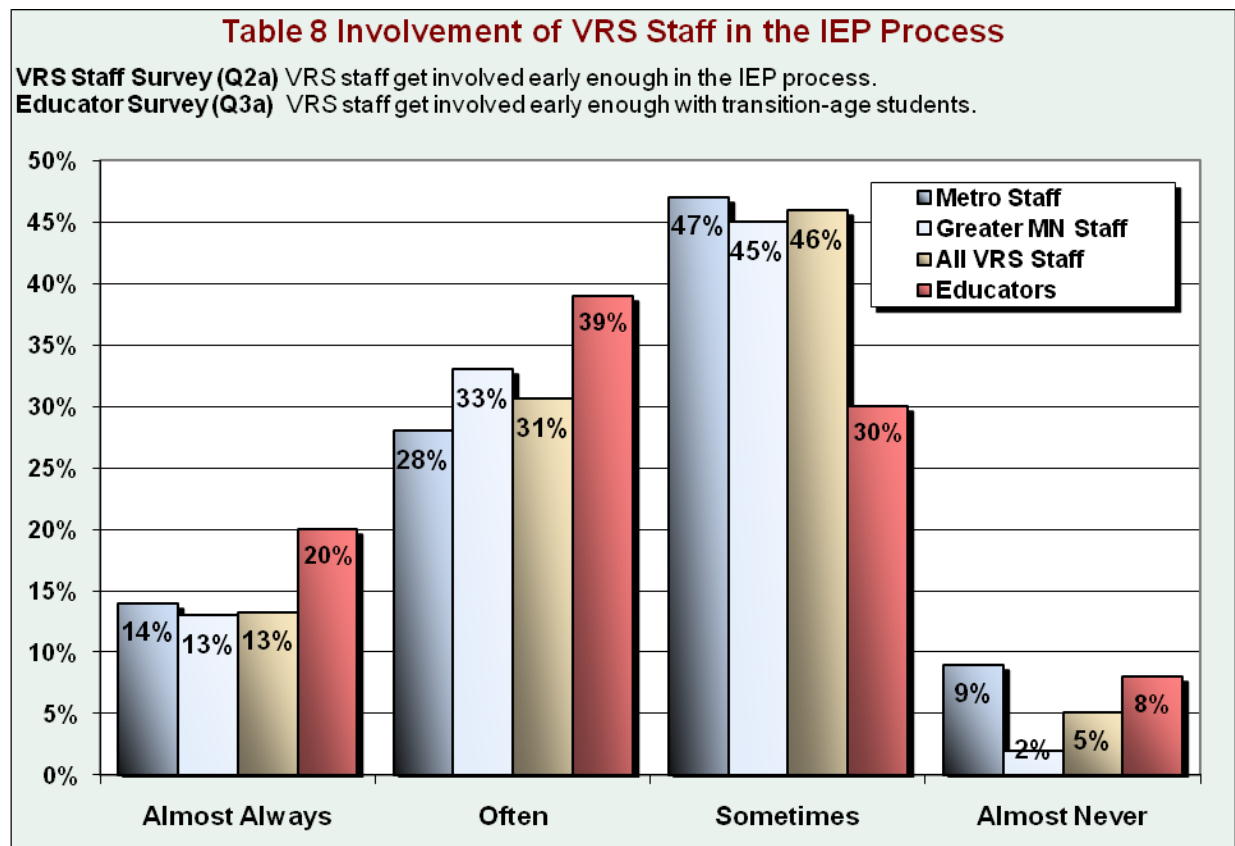
*VRS staff: Most teachers tell students or parents that our services are to help pay for school, so they are mislead as to what our services are really for. Usually I ask students when the come meet me for the first time what they were told about why I was there to see them ... 99% of the time their answer is 'because you can help with school'. I think teachers either don't understand VR OR they tell their students that to get them to come see us.*

## Involvement

Very high proportions of VRS staff indicated being involved with transition-age consumers/students and their families when first being oriented to VRS. Table 7 indicates that 64% of VRS staff and 37% of the educators were *Almost Always* involved *A Great Deal*, and 18% of VRS staff and 34% of the educators were involved *Some*.

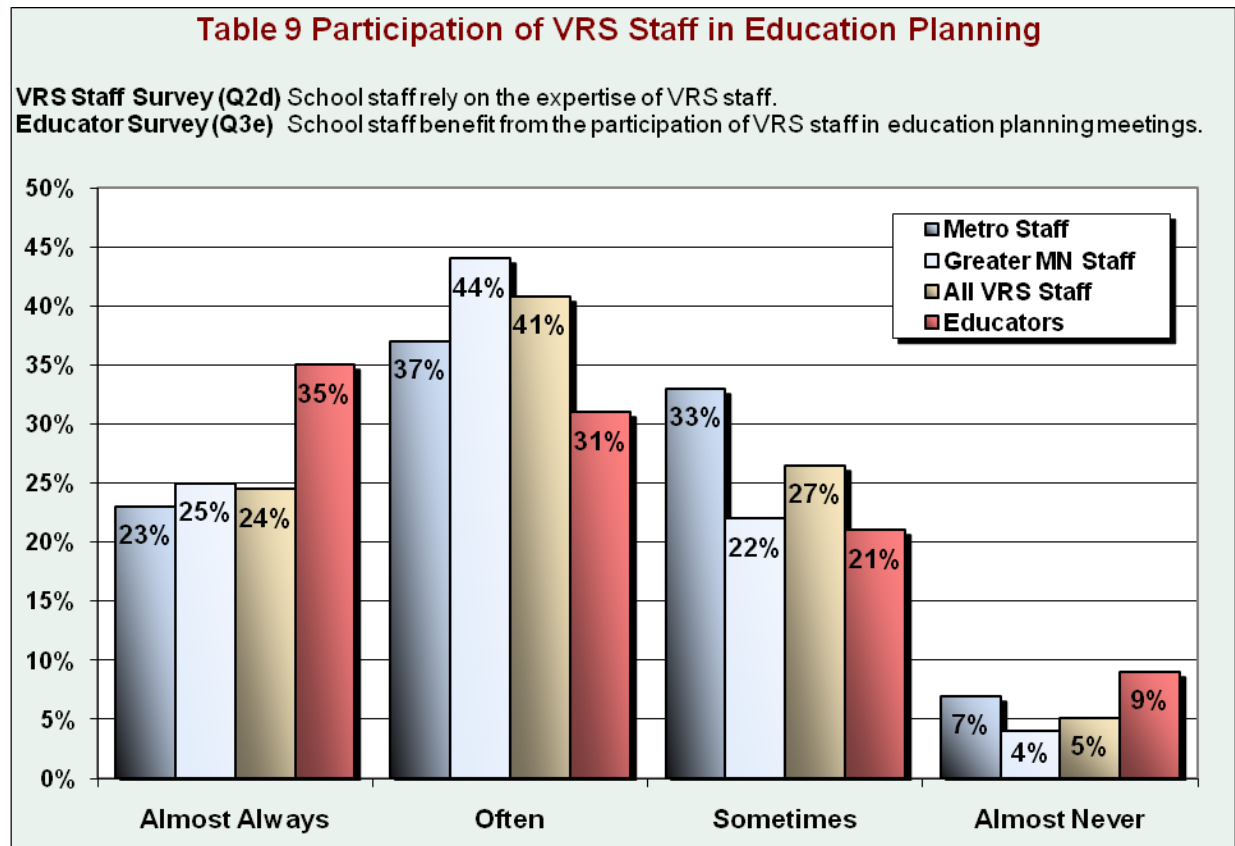


However, as noted in Table 8, the proportion claiming involvement *early enough* in the IEP process was lower, especially when it was from the perspective of VRS staff and not from an educator. Only 44% of VRS staff noted being involved *Almost Always* or *Often* in the IEP process *early enough*, but 59% of the educators thought they were.



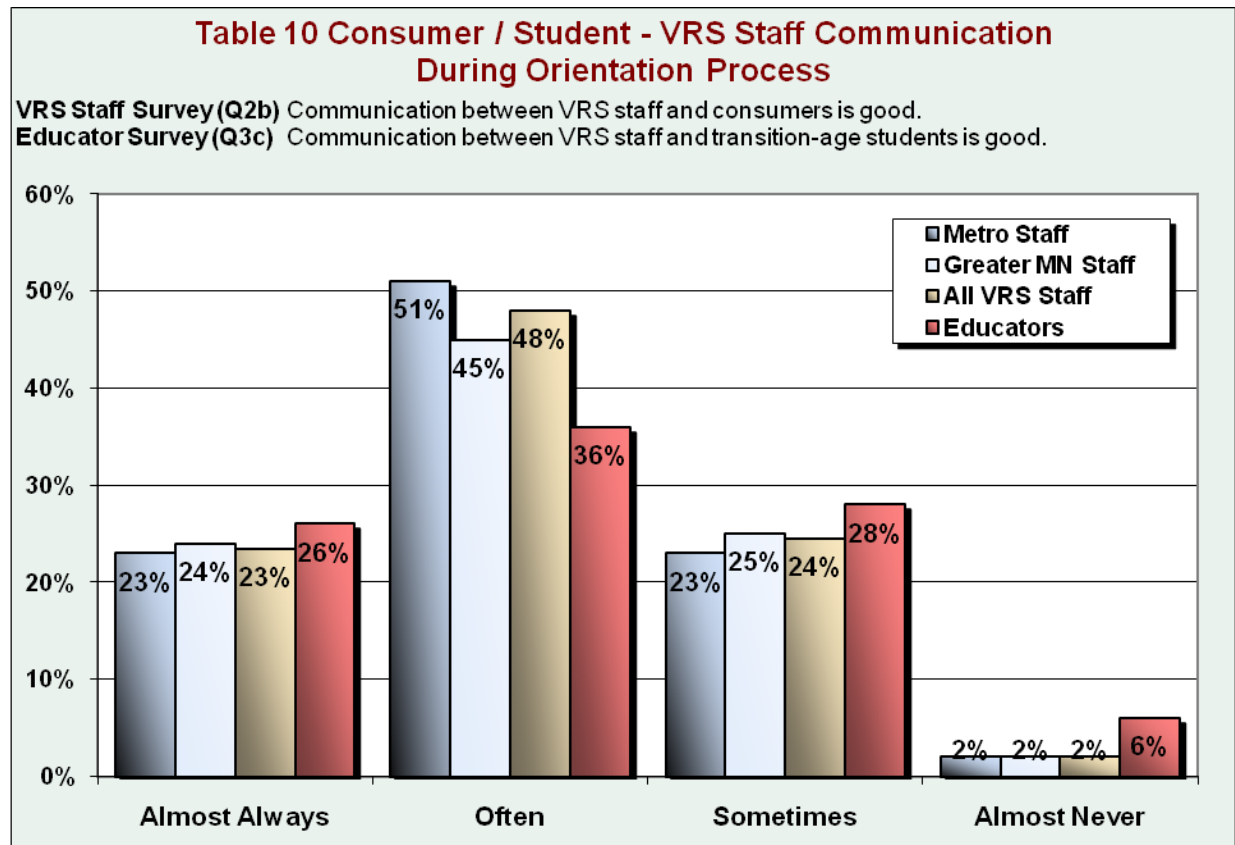
***VRS staff: The weakest part is always reminding certain educators to invite RS to IEP mtgs to discuss services. Some educators are great and some always need reminders.***

Table 9, indicates that roughly equal proportions of VRS staff and educators responded being involved in education planning. VRS staff were asked whether educators rely upon the expertise of VRS staff, and educators were asked if they benefit from the participation of VRS staff in education planning meetings. A total of 65% of VRS staff and 66% of the educators indicated that *Almost Always* or *Often* VRS staff were involved enough for educators to rely upon and benefit from the expertise of VRS staff.

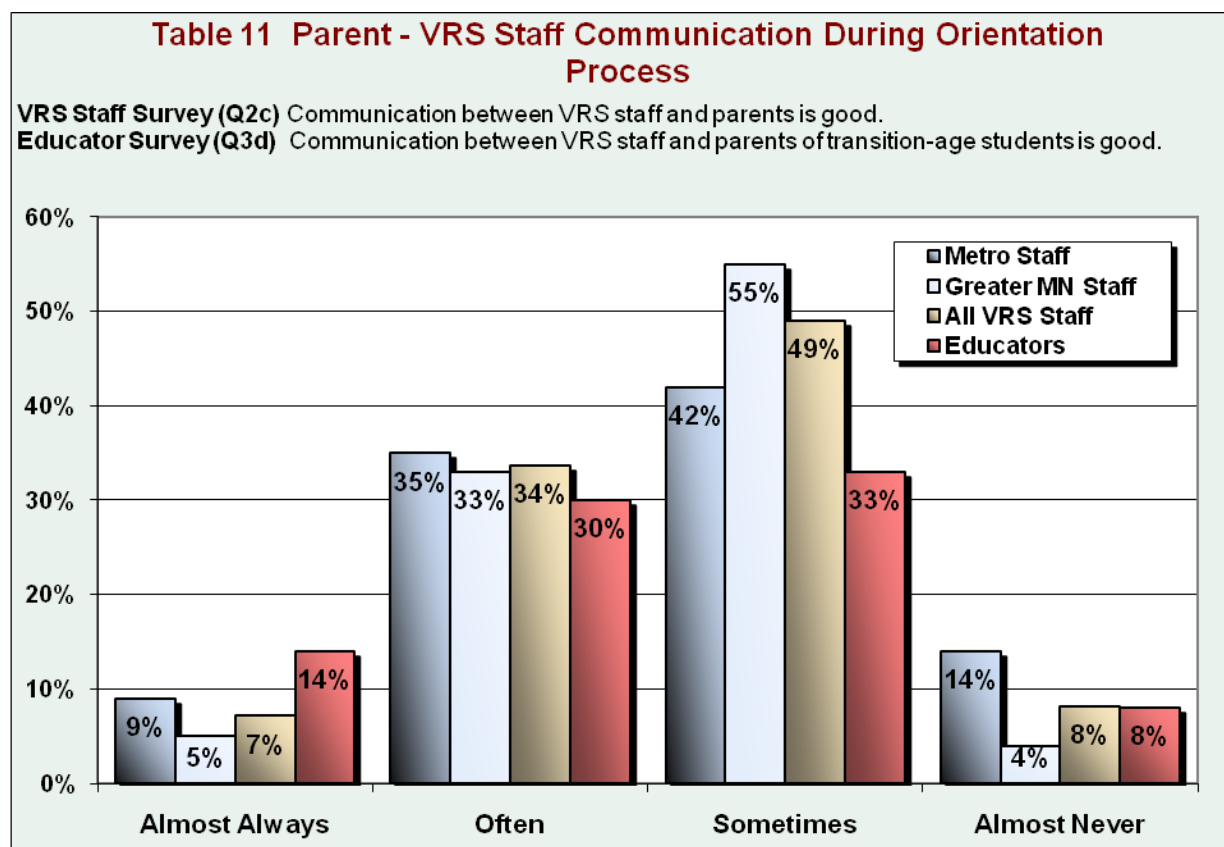


### Communication and Coordination During Orientation to VRS

VRS staff and educators reflected upon communication between VRS staff and transition-age consumers/students and between VRS staff and parents, as well as the frequency of good coordination between themselves (VRS staff and educators) during the VRS orientation process. Table 10 indicates that *Almost Always* or *Often* there was good communication between transition-age consumers/students and VRS staff according to 71% of VRS staff and 62% of the educators.

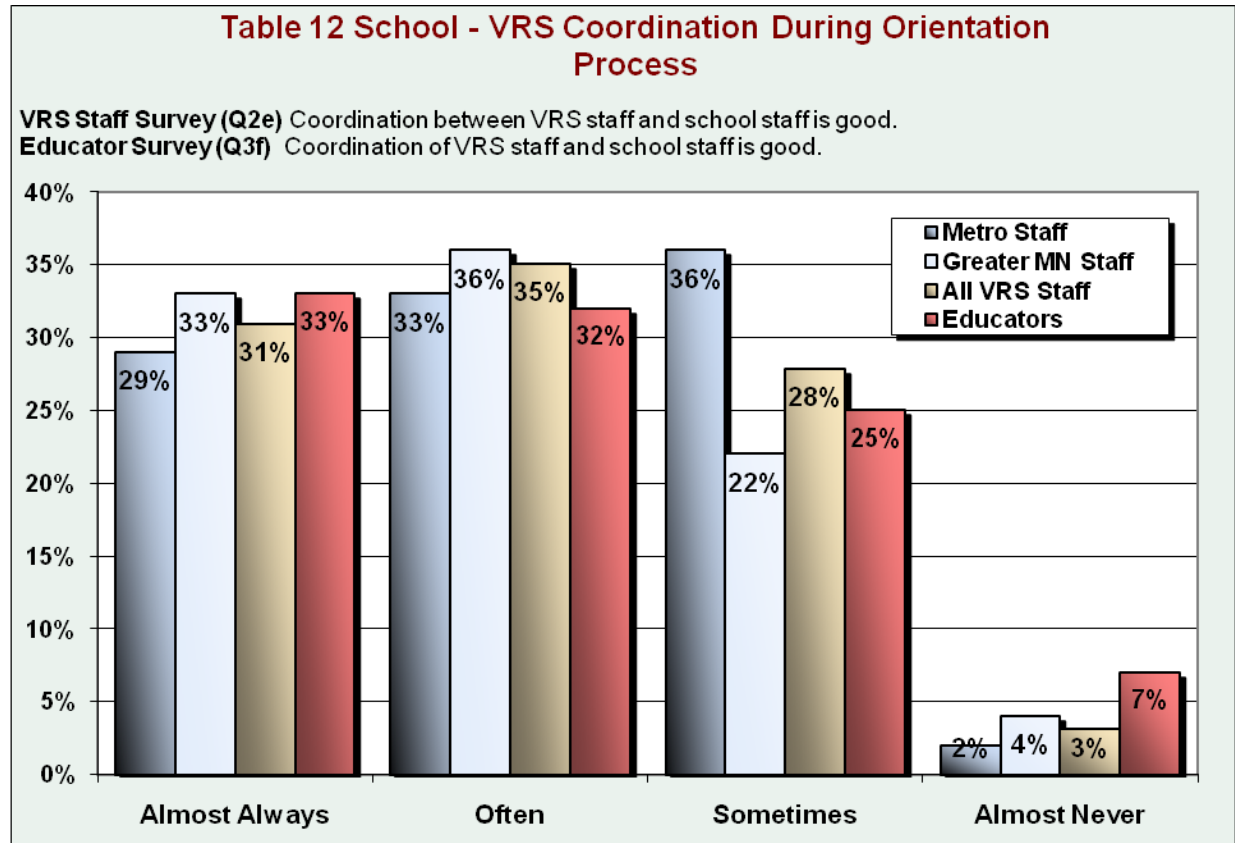


Lower proportions of VRS staff (41%) and educators (44%) noted that *Almost Always* or *Often* there was good communication between VRS staff and parents (Table 11).



***VRS staff: Parents are not at the orientation session or do not care. Sometimes parents will not complete the RS application packet for the student when they are under 18 and return it in a timely manner. This results in the student not getting services from RS even if they want them.***

Practically equal proportions of VRS staff (66%) and educators (65%) indicated that good coordination between VRS staff and educators occurred *Almost Always* or *Often* (Table 12).

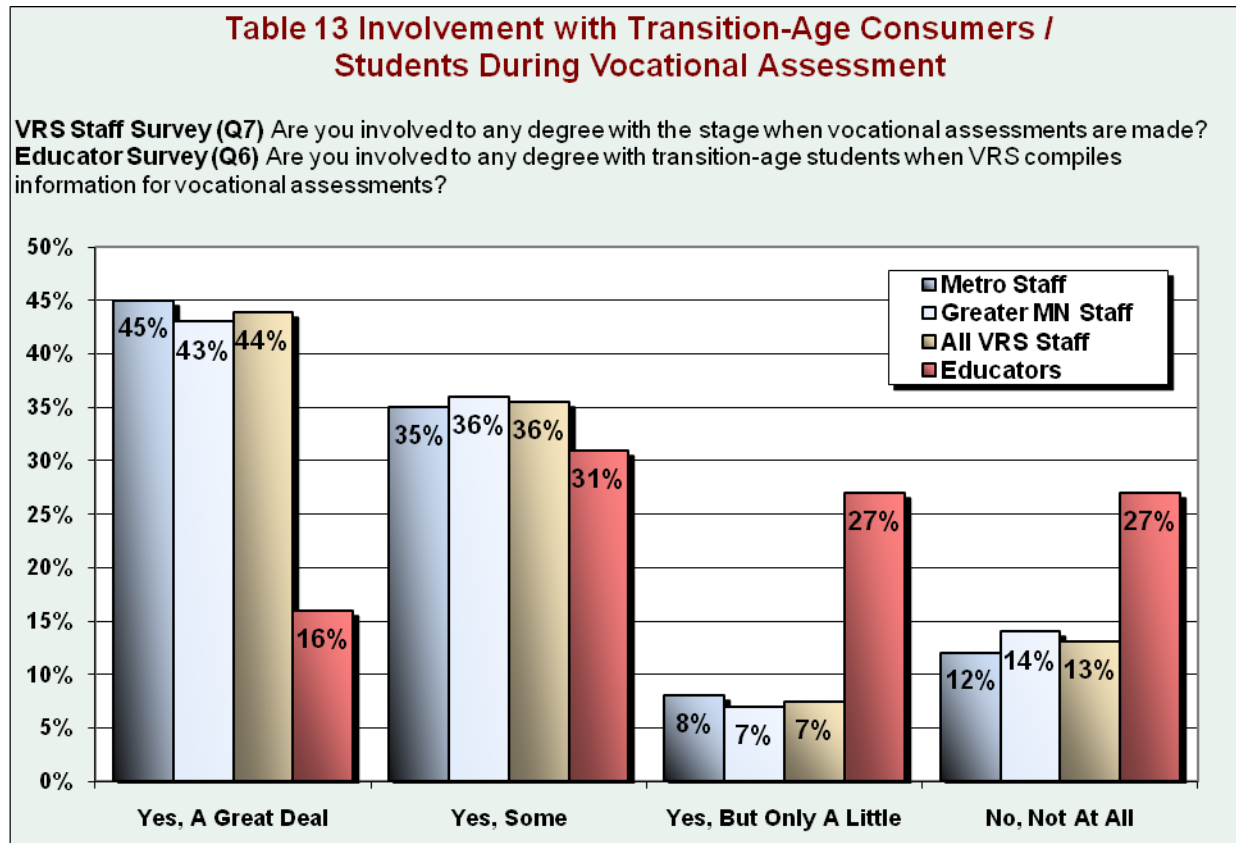


*Educator: A lot of time is spent working with and educating students about RS/VR and I rarely hear about students continuing with services and being successful. It seems like there is no follow through on both sides. It would be nice to see some success stories. It's a lot of paperwork to get them in and then there is no follow through.*

## Vocational Assessment

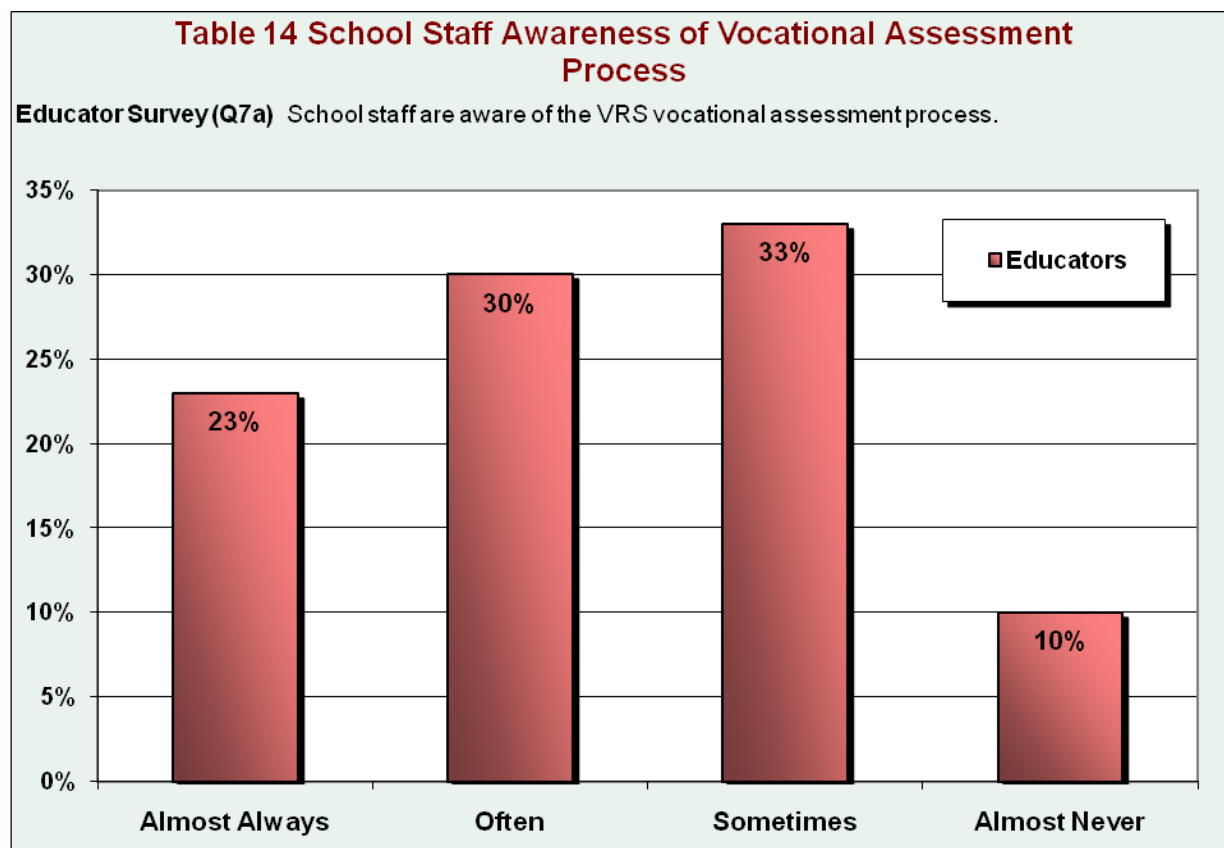
VRS staff were asked about the time when VRS gathers information on the transition-age consumer/student, administers vocational interest inventories and communicates those results.

Table 13 indicates that 80% of VRS staff responded that they are *involved to any degree A Great Deal or Some* during the time vocational assessments are conducted, with fewer than 15% saying that they were *Not At All* involved.





On the other hand, educators were less aware of vocational assessments conducted by VRS. As noted in Table 14, 43% of the educators were *Almost Always* or *Often* aware of the vocational assessment process, and only 47% of the educators were *involved to any degree A Great Deal* or *Some* with transition-age students *when VRS compiles information for vocational assessments*.



*Educator: I don't know how this is working. It maybe because I am not a case manager and am left out of the loop.*

*Educator: I don't think I have ever been involved with a vocational assessment...I don't think vocational assessment is explained in detail...I don't think voc eval is rocket science. We can determine a lot of what is in the report without the eval.*

### ***Understanding of Vocational Assessments – Purpose / Occurrence***

Table 15 and Table 16 denote the perceptions of VRS staff and educators of transition-age consumer/student and parent understanding of vocational assessments.

Table 15 indicates that *Almost Always* or *Often*, similar percentages of VRS staff (60%) and educators (53%) thought transition-age consumers/students understood the purpose of vocational assessments.

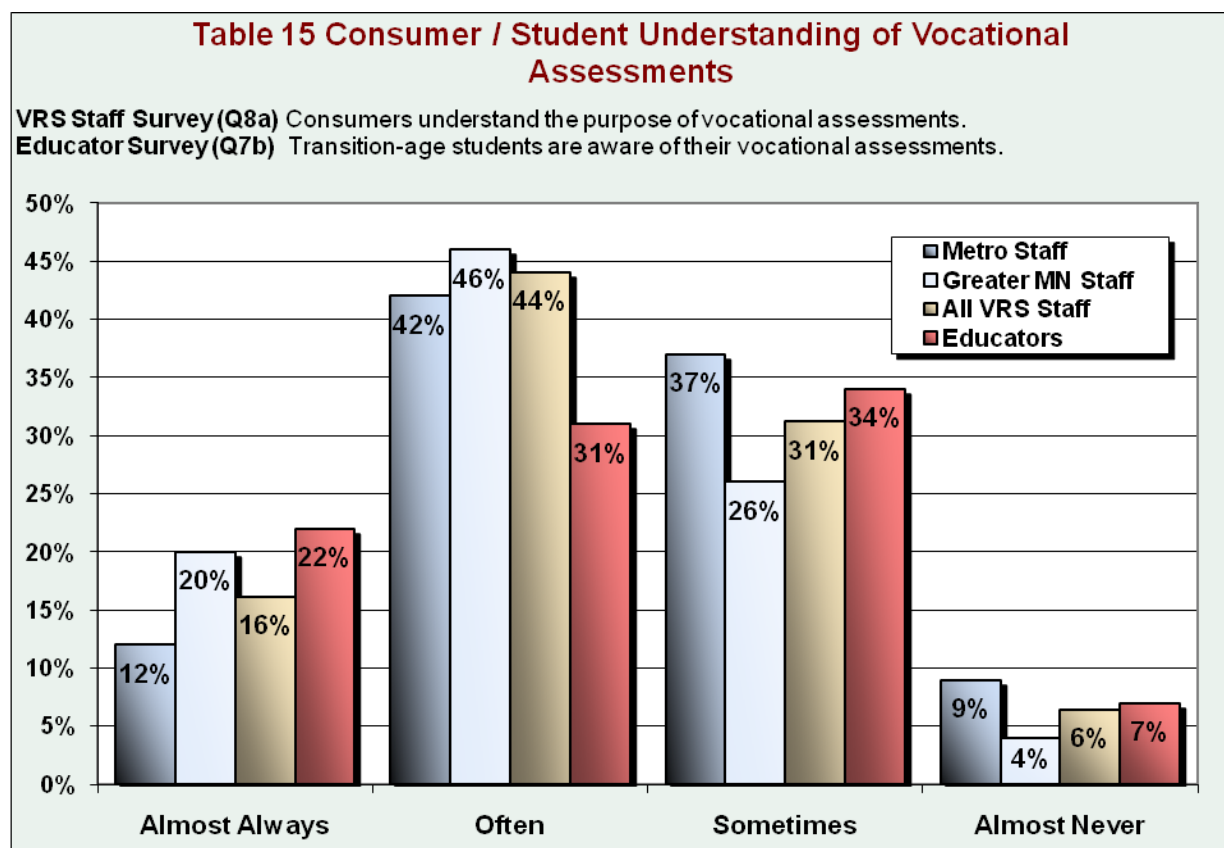
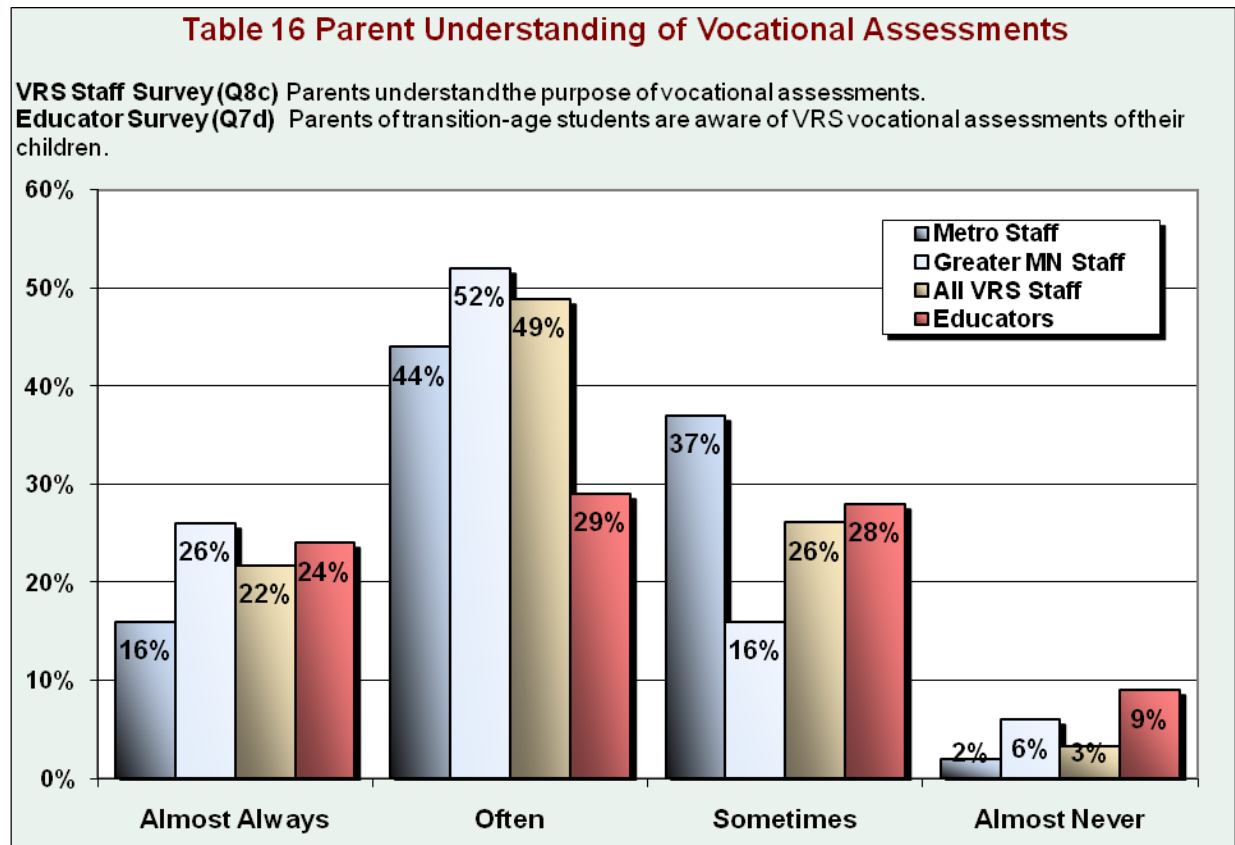


Table 16 indicates that *Almost Always* or *Often*, much higher percentages of VRS staff (71%) than educators (53%) thought parents understood the purpose of vocational assessments.



**Educator:** Parents need to get more involved. Team should call an IEP meeting to go over results.

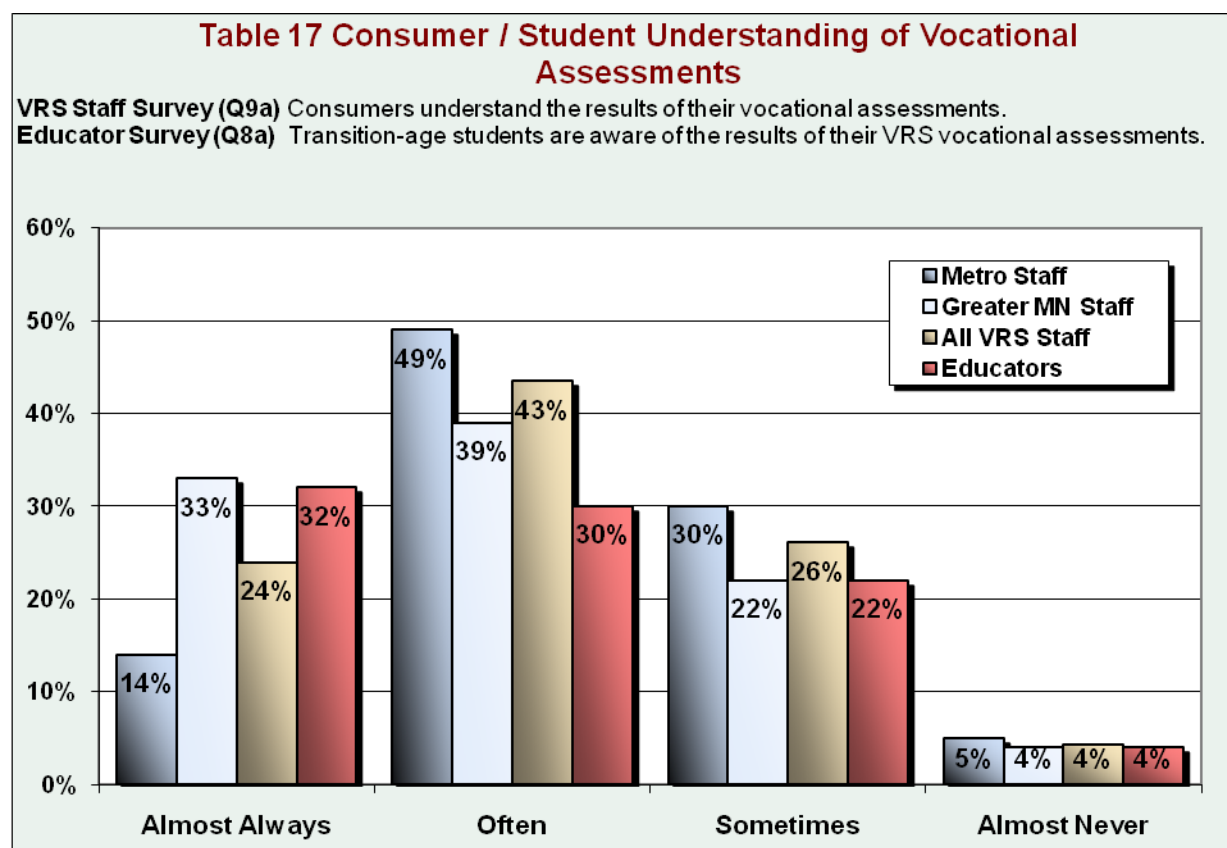
**VRS staff:** I think that students and parents appreciate the findings when they do show for the assessment. It does provide good information in career planning and the student is set up for success instead of failure.

**Educator:** I believe the student should be part of sharing the results at a meeting. Most students could be more involved with this and hopefully this would help the student understand what they are good at and what are challenges for them.

## Understanding of Vocational Assessments – Results

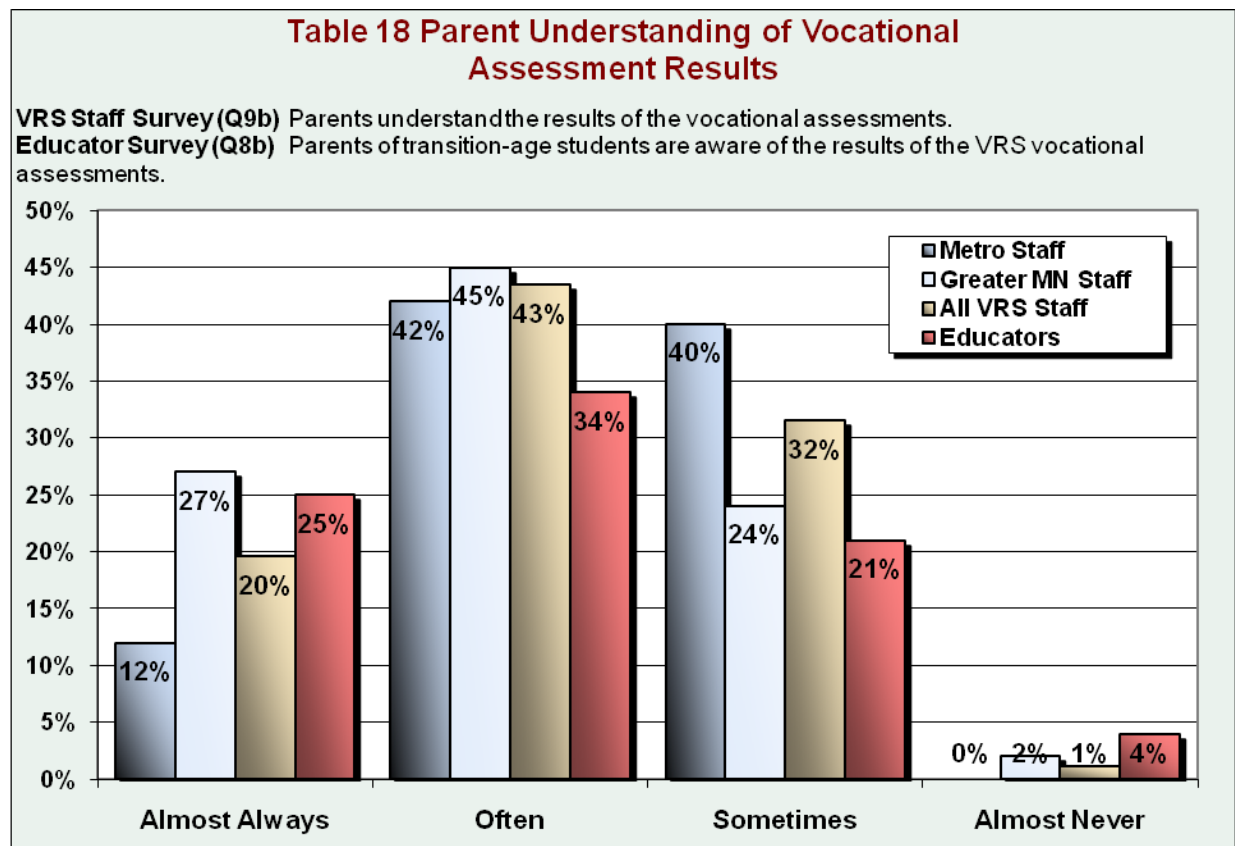
Table 17 and Table 18 describe the perceptions of VRS staff and educators of transition-age consumer/student and parent understanding of the results of vocational assessments.

VRS staff and educators were asked for their perception of how often transition-age consumers/students understood the results of vocational assessments. Table 17 indicates that *Almost Always* or *Often* 67% of VRS staff, and 62% of the educators thought transition-age consumers understood the results of vocational assessments, or were aware of the results of their assessments, respectively.



***VRS staff: It gives the counselor and the consumer a strong understanding of their support needs, strengths and interest in work. Also, identifies what obstacles are in place to employment.***

Table 18 indicates that *Almost Always* or *Often* 63% of VRS staff thought parents of transition-age consumers understood the results of vocational assessments and 59% of the educators thought that parents of transition-age students were aware of the results of their assessments.

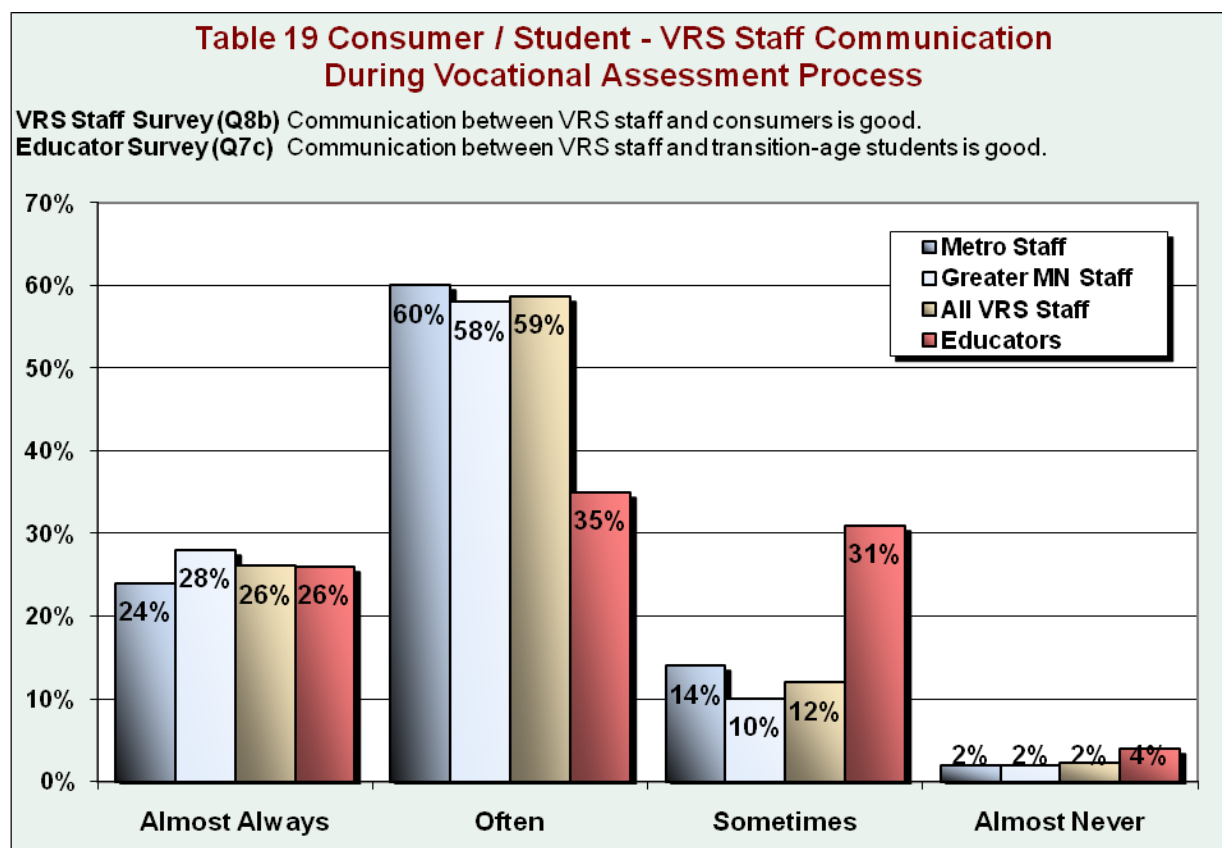


*Educator: It is all so new to parents and students to plan for their future as adults. It just takes them time to hear and understand the options.*

## Communication and Coordination During Vocational Assessments

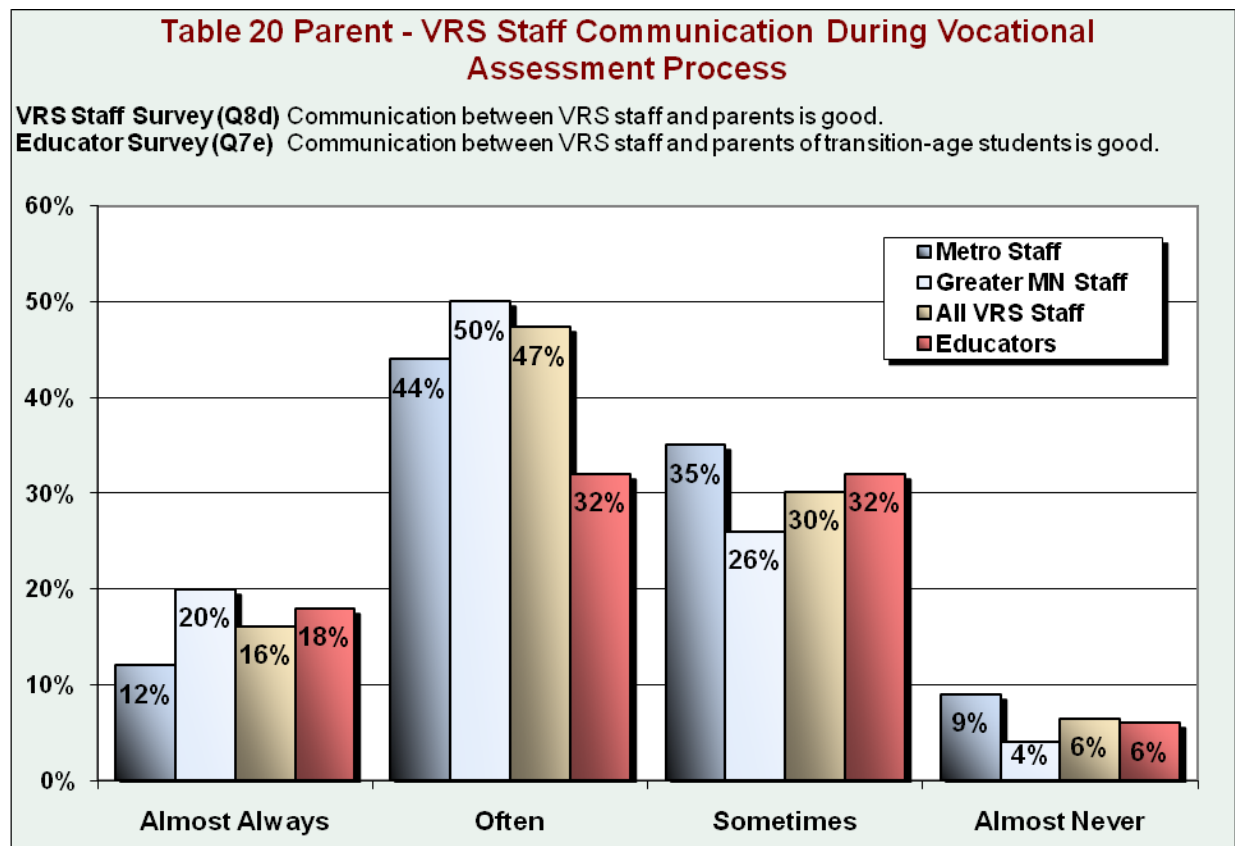
Table 19, Table 20 and Table 21 describe the perceptions of VRS staff and educators of the communication VRS staff have with transition-age consumers/students and parents and the coordination between VRS staff and educators.

Table 19 indicates that equal proportions (26%) of VRS staff and educators thought that *Almost Always* communication between VRS staff and transition-age consumers/students was good, but that a much greater percentage of VRS staff (59%) than educators (35%) thought that good communication occurred *Often*.



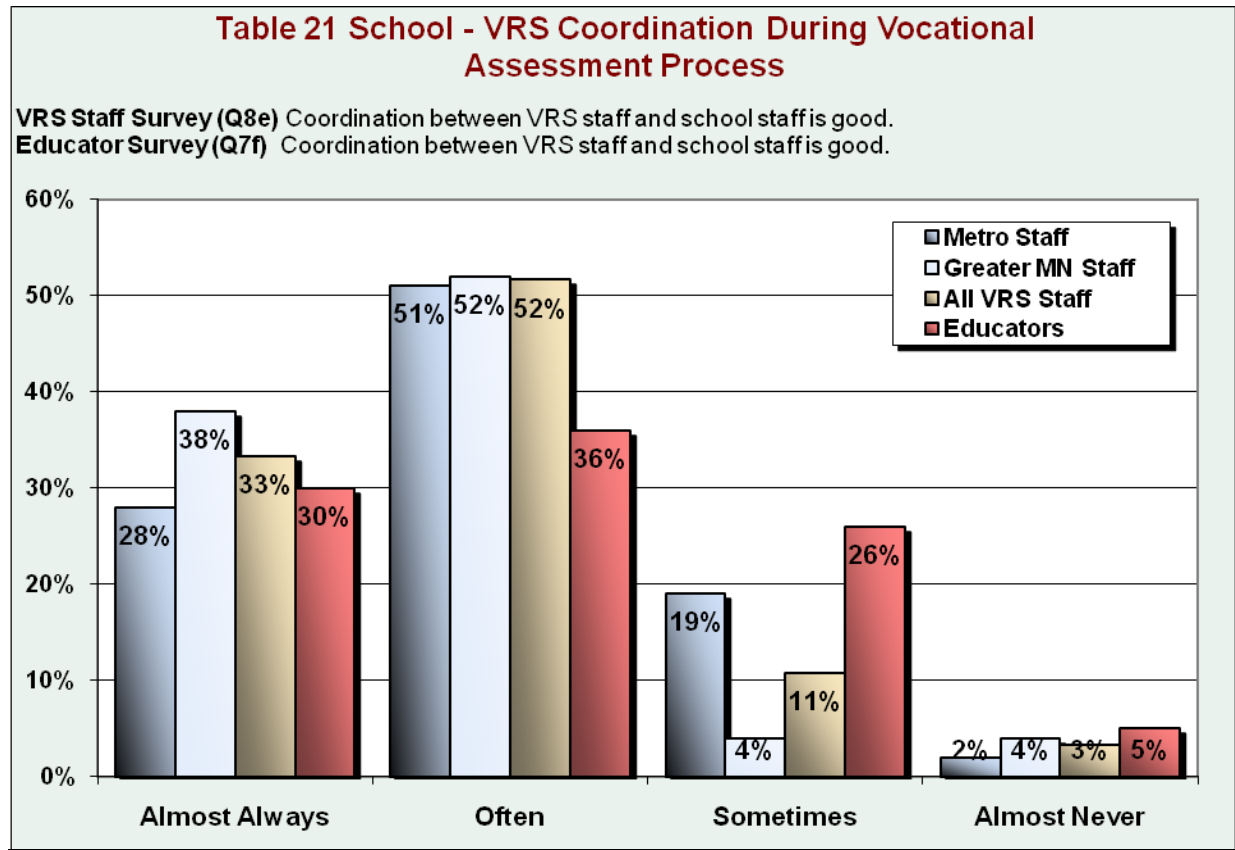
*Educator: I work with individuals that are low functioning and ... I am really not aware of the assessment piece. ... Given what I am doing I would like to inquire about assessments and get much more information.*

Table 20 indicates a similar difference between VRS staff and educators. About the same proportions of VRS staff as educators *Almost Always* thought VRS staff communication with parents was good, but a greater proportion of VRS staff (47%) than educators (32%) thought that good communication occurred *Often*.



**Educator:** *Maybe send out lots of good literature that can be handed out to parents that is very easy for them to understand...and very direct. These parents are not usually the most bright and capable and need very direct information...simple!*

Table 21 depicts a similar difference of perception between VRS staff and educators as noted above in Table 19 and Table 20. Almost equal proportions of VRS staff (33%) as educators (30%) indicated that *Almost Always*, coordination between VRS staff and educators was good, but meaningfully more VRS staff (52%) than educators (36%) indicated that, *Often*, there was good coordination between VRS staff and educators.



### Career Exploration

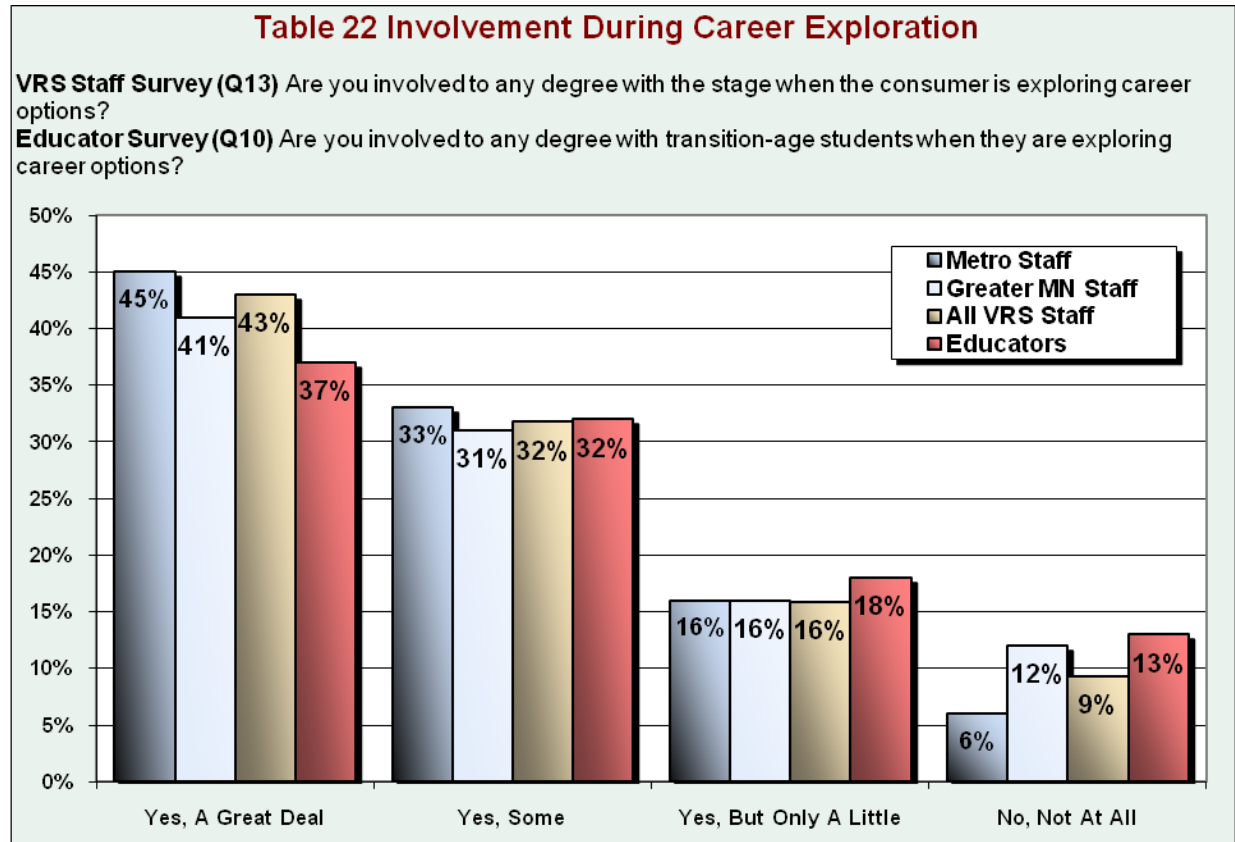
During career exploration, transition-age consumers become aware of labor market information and begin learning about different jobs or careers through actual experiences.

VRS staff and educators were asked about their level of involvement, provision of labor market information, consumer opportunities for work experience, especially in areas of interest, and communication and coordination with transition-age consumers/students, parents and professional staff.



## Professional Involvement

Table 22 indicates that 76% of the VRS staff and 69% of the educators thought that they were involved *A Great Deal* or *Some* with transition-age consumers/students while they were exploring career options.

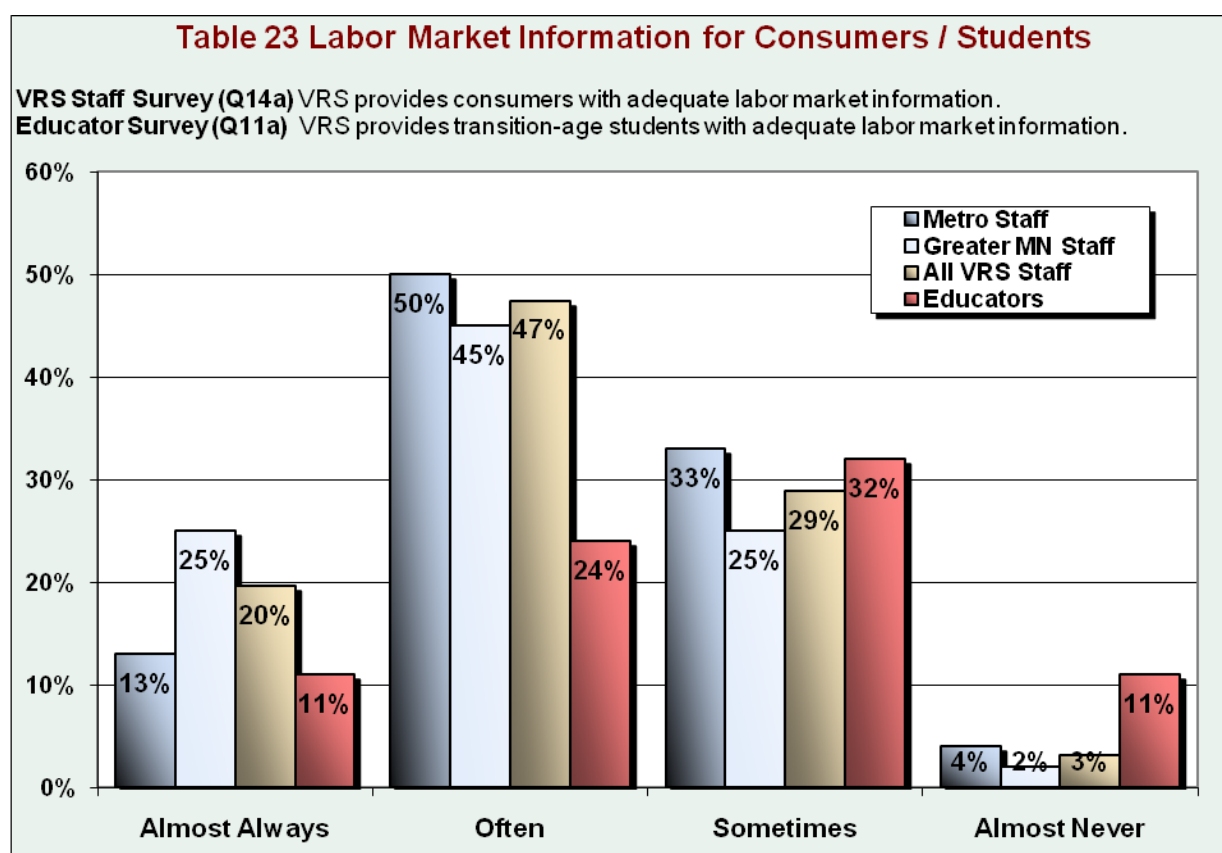


***VRS staff: The clients enjoy one on one attention that they receive in looking into careers.***

## Labor Market Information

It is assumed that knowing the supply and/or demand projections for different jobs and careers will have a positive effect upon career exploration and career decisions-making. VRS staff and educators were asked about the frequency VRS provides transition-age consumers/students and parents with adequate labor market information.

Table 23 indicates that much greater proportions of VRS staff (67%) than educators (35%) thought that *Almost Always* or *Often* VRS provides transition-age consumers/students with adequate labor market information. In addition, educators, by almost a factor of 4 to 1, thought VRS provided this type of information to transition-age consumers/students *Almost Never*.



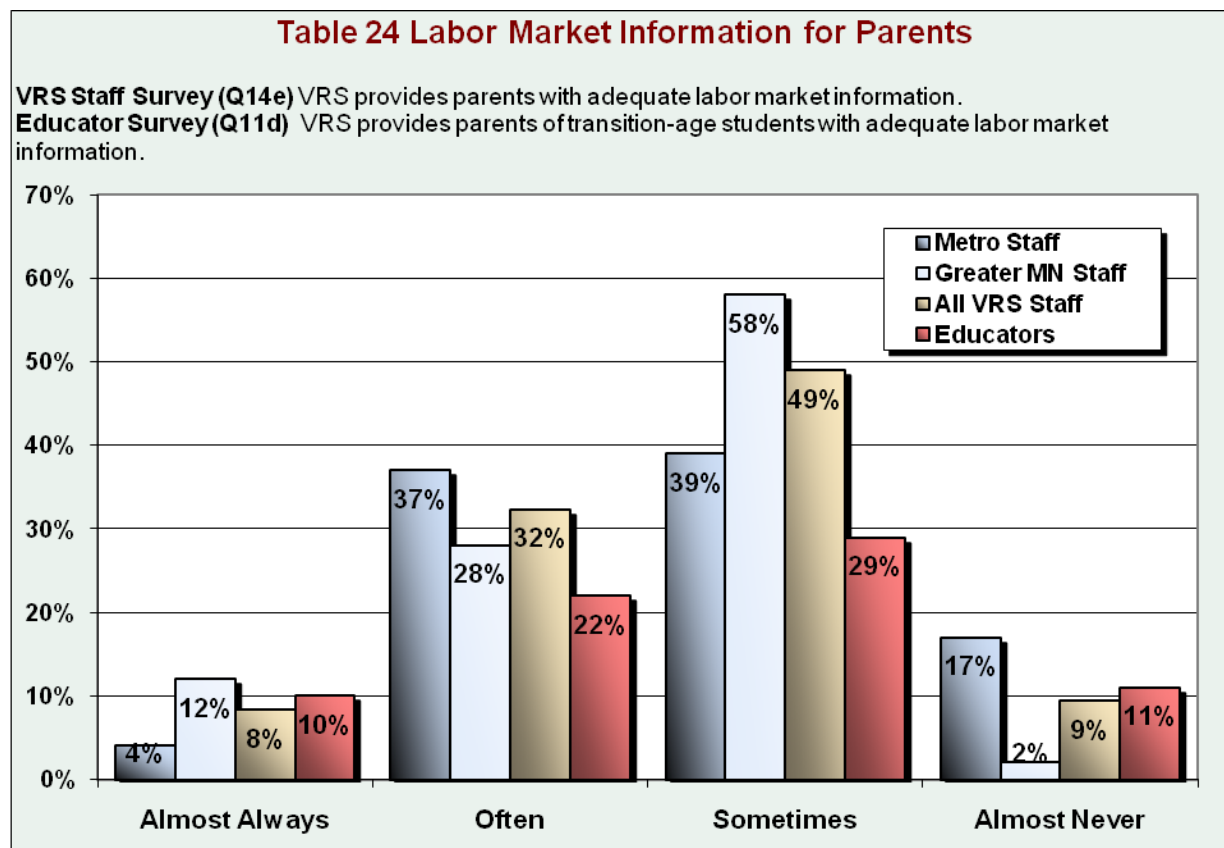
***VRS staff: Students often find careers that they never knew about, considered, or found they had the skills to possibly do.***

***VRS staff: I think the strongest stage is getting the students career specific information including labor market information ... using MCIS and ISEEK to provide information about careers they have considered and to see the look at information and make informed choices about careers.***

**Educator:** Career exploration is done primarily by the school. RS only gets involved when the student has skills beyond entry-level and specific information is needed.

**Educator:** We would like to be able to sit down with our DRS liaison and have discussion with them and receive information from them. We do not have any time to do that right now.

Table 24 indicates that *Almost Always* or *Often*, slightly higher percentages of VRS staff (40%) than educators (32%) thought VRS provides parents of transition-age consumers/students with adequate labor market information.



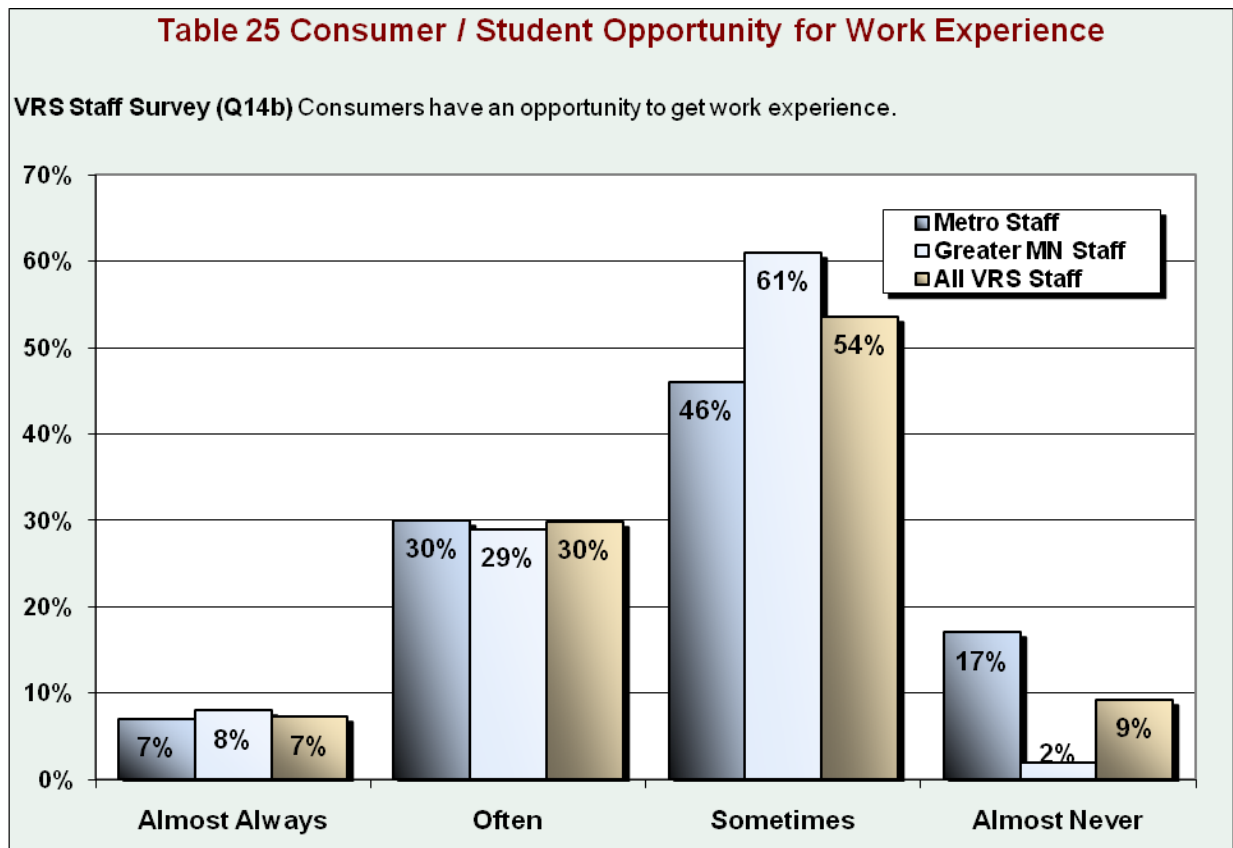
**VRS staff:** Lack of parental involvement. A number of parents don't even bother attending their child's IEP meetings.

**VRS staff:** Sometimes we have to deal with unrealistic parents and guardians.

**Educator:** Parents frequently have unrealistic goals for their students with disabilities and students STRUGGLE to follow through with expectations.

## Work Experience

Only VRS staff were asked if transition-age consumers have an opportunity to get work experience. Often there is no better method to explore a job or career, than to have an actual, hands-on experience with it. Only VRS staff were asked how often this occurs with their transition-age consumers, because it was assumed that educators were not going to be as involved in this aspect of VRS. Table 25 indicates that *Almost Always* or *Often*, 37% of VRS staff thought that transition-age consumers have an opportunity to get work experience.



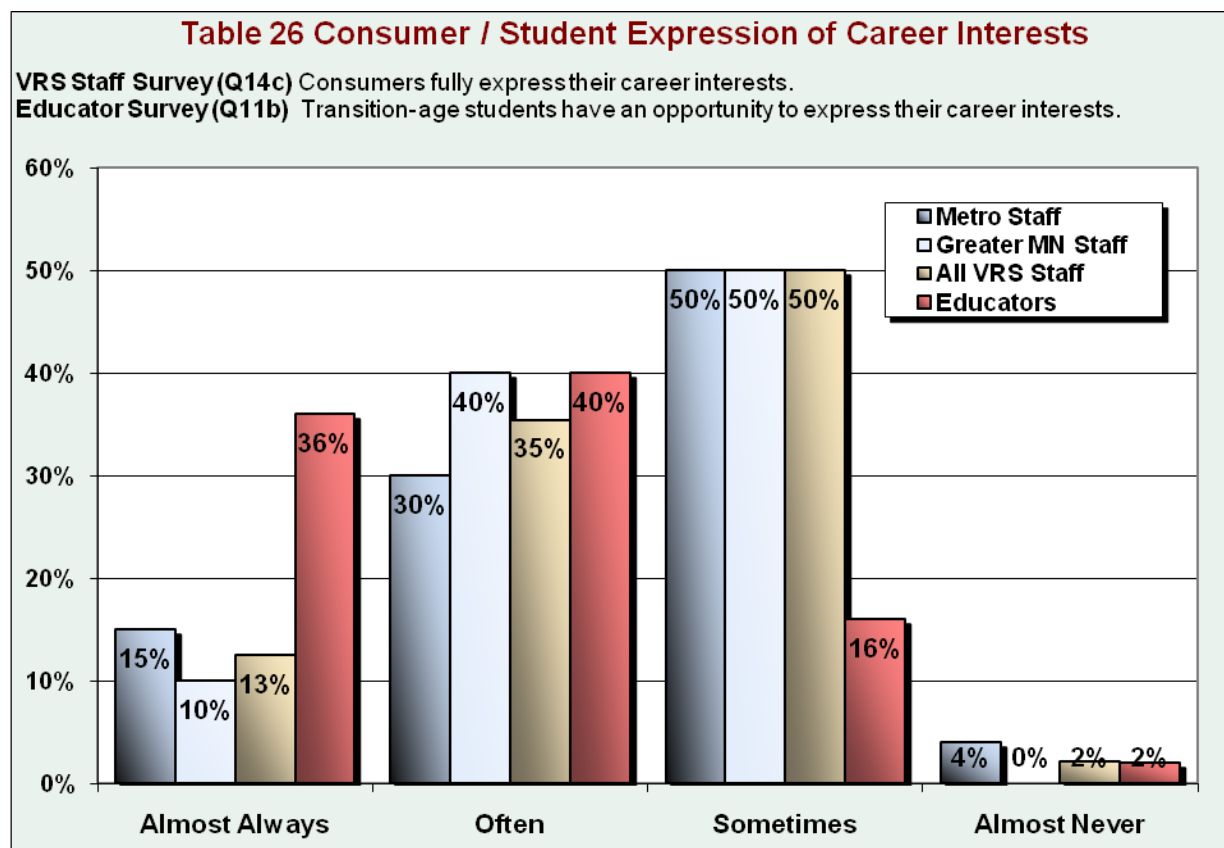
***VRS staff: Many students have very little work experience and job knowledge. School work experience programs are few and far between. We used to be able to help with this.***

***VRS staff: We need more resources for job shadowing. I've tried setting these up on my own, but they are very time consuming.***

## Expression of Career Interests

Work experience in a career is important for consumers/students, but it should be part of an expression of interest in a career in which the transition-age consumer/student is interested. VRS staff and educators were asked how frequently

transition-age consumers/students were able to fully express their career interests, and it was educators who thought that was true more often than VRS staff. Table 26 indicates a meaningful difference between the proportions of VRS staff (48%) and educators (76%) who thought that, *Almost Always* or *Often*, transition-age consumers/students were able to express their career interests.



***Educator: Students have trouble expressing their interests and it becomes difficult to find appropriate career exploration activities.***

***Educator: Many of the students I work with lack the necessary skills.***

***Educator: Students often choose unrealistic careers for themselves which makes it difficult to explore more realistic careers.***

***Educator: ... they do not have the ability to explore career options. The ones that have the ability face the challenge of limited career choices.***

## Communication / Coordination

During career exploration communication or coordination occurs between and among VRS staff, educators, transition-age consumers/students, parents, and postsecondary education staff. The surveys questioned VRS staff and educators on communication between VRS staff and transition-age consumers/students (Table 27), VRS staff and parents (Table 28) and VRS staff and educators (Table 29), as well as asking VRS staff about their coordination with postsecondary education staff (Table 3.9).

***Educator: The coordination between school staff and RS/VR has been more challenging this year due to the availability of our RS/VR person.***

***Educator: I only coordinate for the RS/VR staff to come for IEP meetings. What happens after that is between the families and RS/VR staff.***

Table 27 indicates that much greater percentages of VRS staff (84%) than educators (55%) thought that, *Almost Always* or *Often*, communication between VRS staff and transition-age consumers/students during career exploration was good.

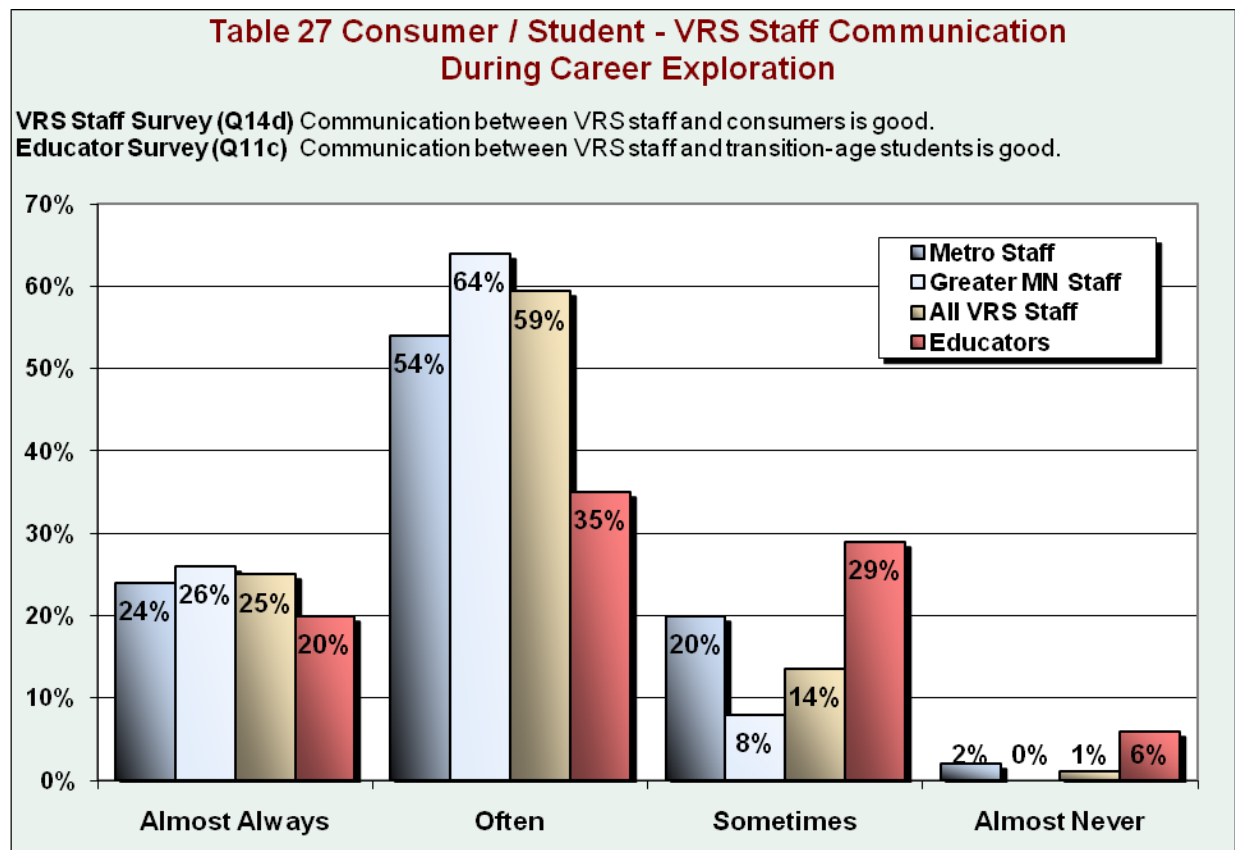


Table 28 describes VRS staff's perception of communication between themselves and parents. A total of 9% thought that, *Almost Always*, they had good communication with parents, and 44% thought that good communication occurred *Often*.

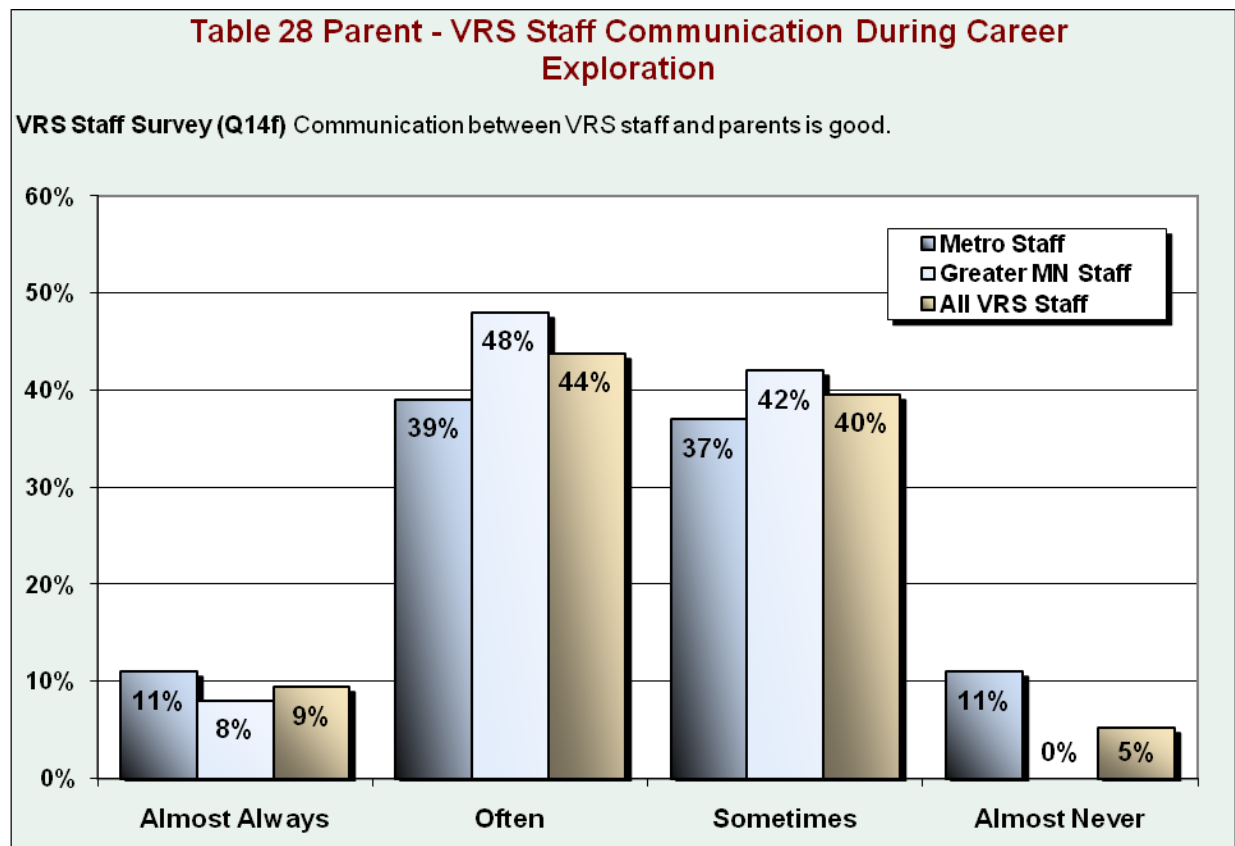


Table 29 notes that much higher proportions of VRS staff (80%) than educators (58%) thought that, *Almost Always* or *Often*, there was good coordination between VRS staff and educators.

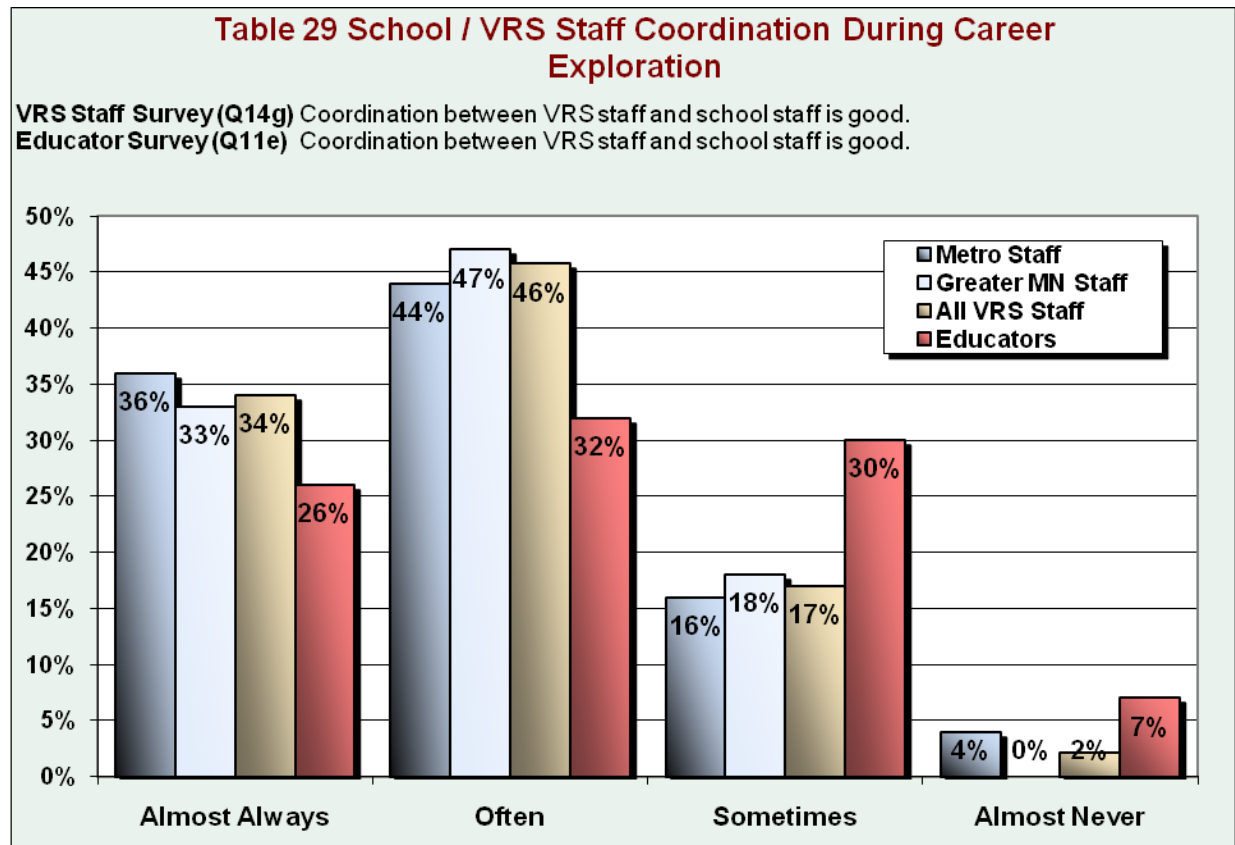
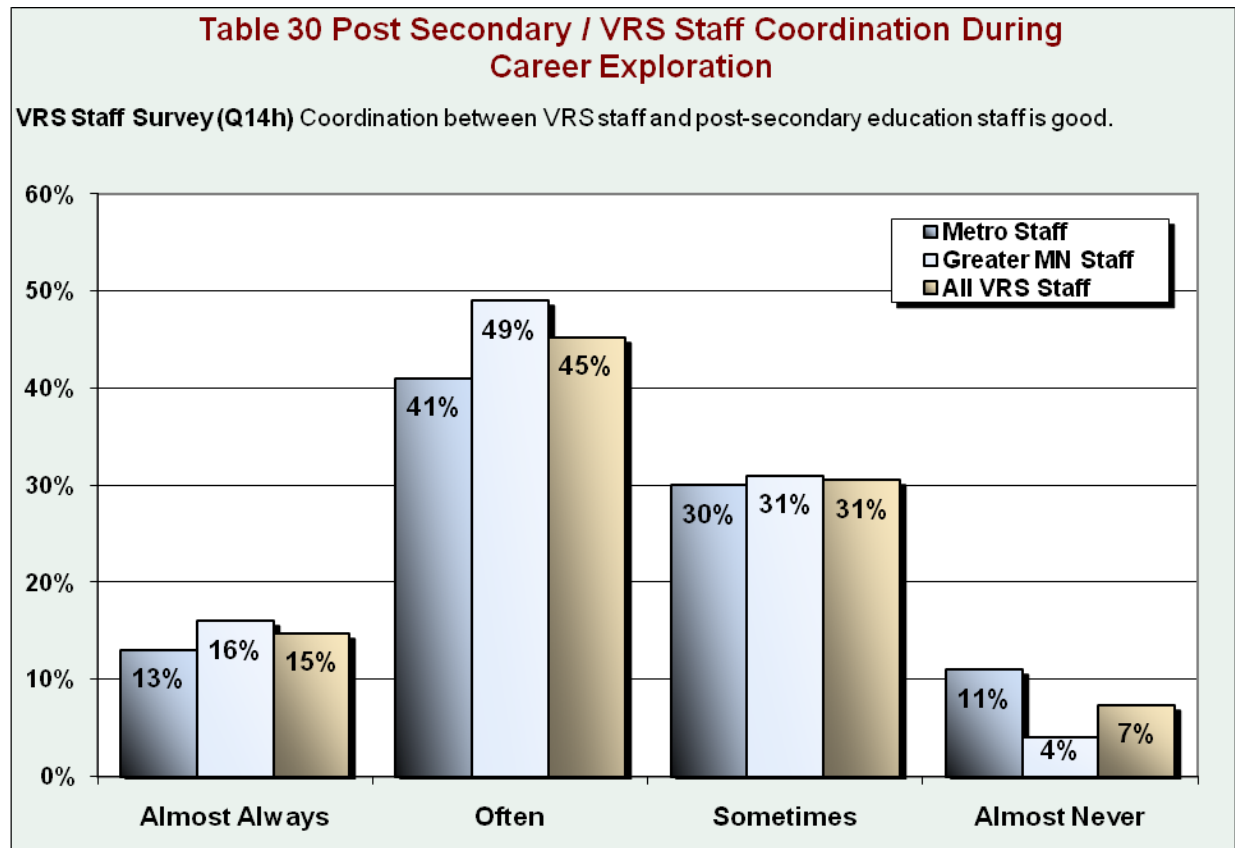




Table 30 indicates that 60% of VRS staff thought that, *Almost Always* or *Often*, there was good coordination between them and postsecondary educators.



***Educator:*** Communication has gotten better this year, but I think parent are still out of loop and hard to place students or students without clear goals are left out.

***VRS staff:*** Students may tell parents/teachers one thing and then tell RS another which leads to communication problems.

***VRS staff:*** The schools do their piece, VR does our piece, ... Greatly depends on the case manager.

***VRS staff:*** It could be that the information the school provides the student ... may not coincide with what VR/RS provides.

## **Employment Plan**

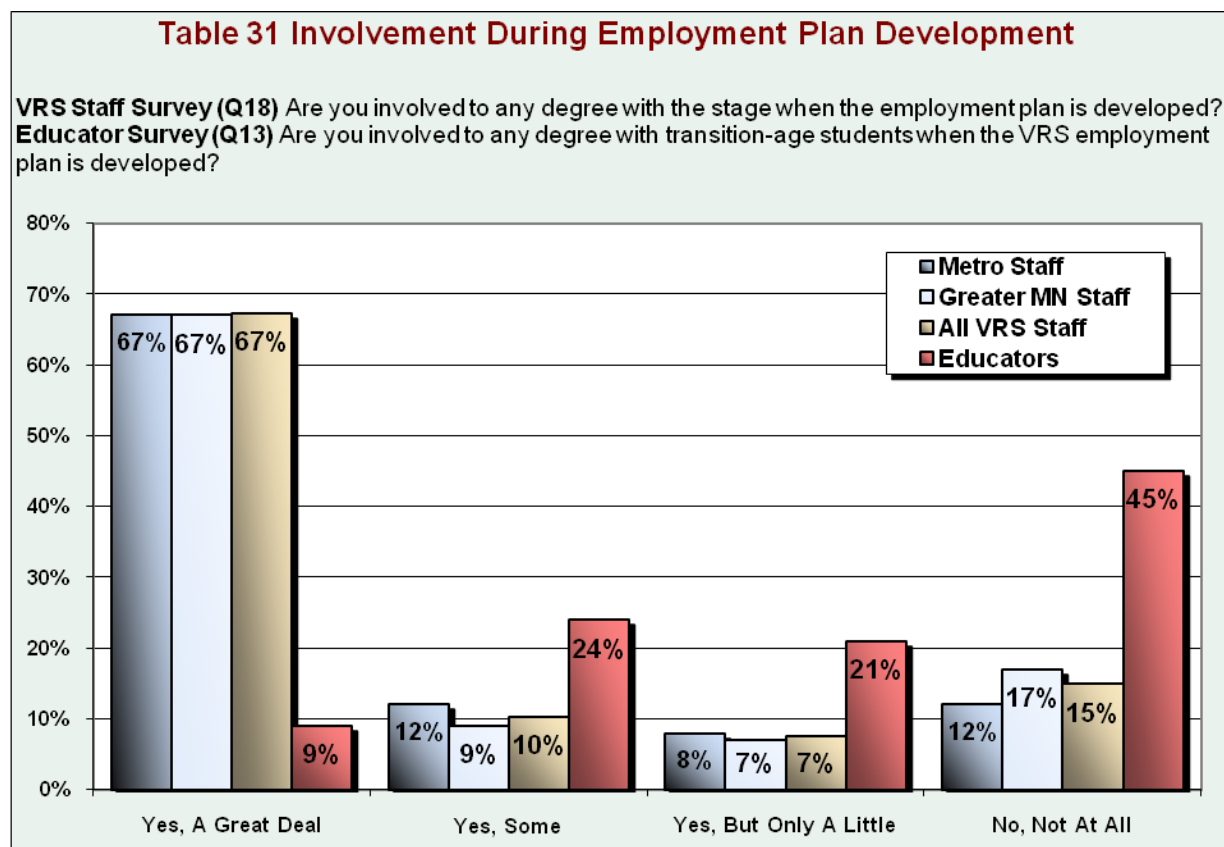
The Employment Plan delineates the services a transition-age consumer receives from VRS. VRS generally will not purchase services for consumers without an approved Employment Plan. The Employment Plan identifies the transition-age consumer's employment goal and specifies how the goal will be achieved and the services needed to achieve the goal. VRS staff and educators responded to questions about the frequency that various critical activities occurred, including: involvement of VRS staff and educators; transition-age consumer/student, parental and educators' understanding of the Plan; transition-age consumer/student understanding of choices, expression of vocational interests, and incorporation of strengths and interests in the Plan; communication and coordination among the parties involved in developing the Employment Plan; the appropriateness of the Employment Plan to the geographical area; transition-age consumer/student and parental understanding of their expected financial contributions; and how clearly services were identified in the Plan.

***VRS staff: The employment plan provides the student with an outline of the services that will be provided. ... It gives the client an overview as to what it will take to reach gainful employment and helps the student see the big picture.***

***VRS staff: It lays out all the steps and is an important visual for them. It is the strongest part of the EP stage, putting the services in writing and having the student/parent/school know what RS can do for them.***

## Professional Staff Involvement

Earlier VRS staff and educators responded to questions about their involvement during the IEP process. For the Employment Plan, we asked VRS staff and educators about the frequency of their involvement with transition-age consumer/students *when the VRS employment plan is developed*. Slightly lower, but not meaningfully, proportions of VRS staff than educators, *Almost Always* or *Often*, thought they were involved early enough in IEP planning (refer to previous table). In the development of the Employment Plan, the proportions were reversed, meaningfully. Table 31 indicates that 77% of VRS staff reported that they were involved *A Great Deal* or *Some* the development of the Employment Plan. Only 33% of the educators indicated similar involvement. In contrast to the high level of involvement of VRS staff, 45% of the educators described their involvement as *Not At All*.



## Understanding the Plan

VRS staff and educators were offered opinion on several understandability aspects of the Employment Plan. Do consumers/students have a good understanding of the Employment Plan?; and do they understand that they have choices in the development of the Employment Plan? Do parents understand the Employment Plan? Do educators understand the Employment Plan?

### Transition-age Consumers / Students

Table 32 indicates that 85% of VRS staff thought that, *Almost Always* or *Often*, that transition-age consumers had a *good understanding of the Employment Plan*, while only 59% of the educators thought that, *Almost Always* or *Often*, students had were aware of the VRS Employment Plan.

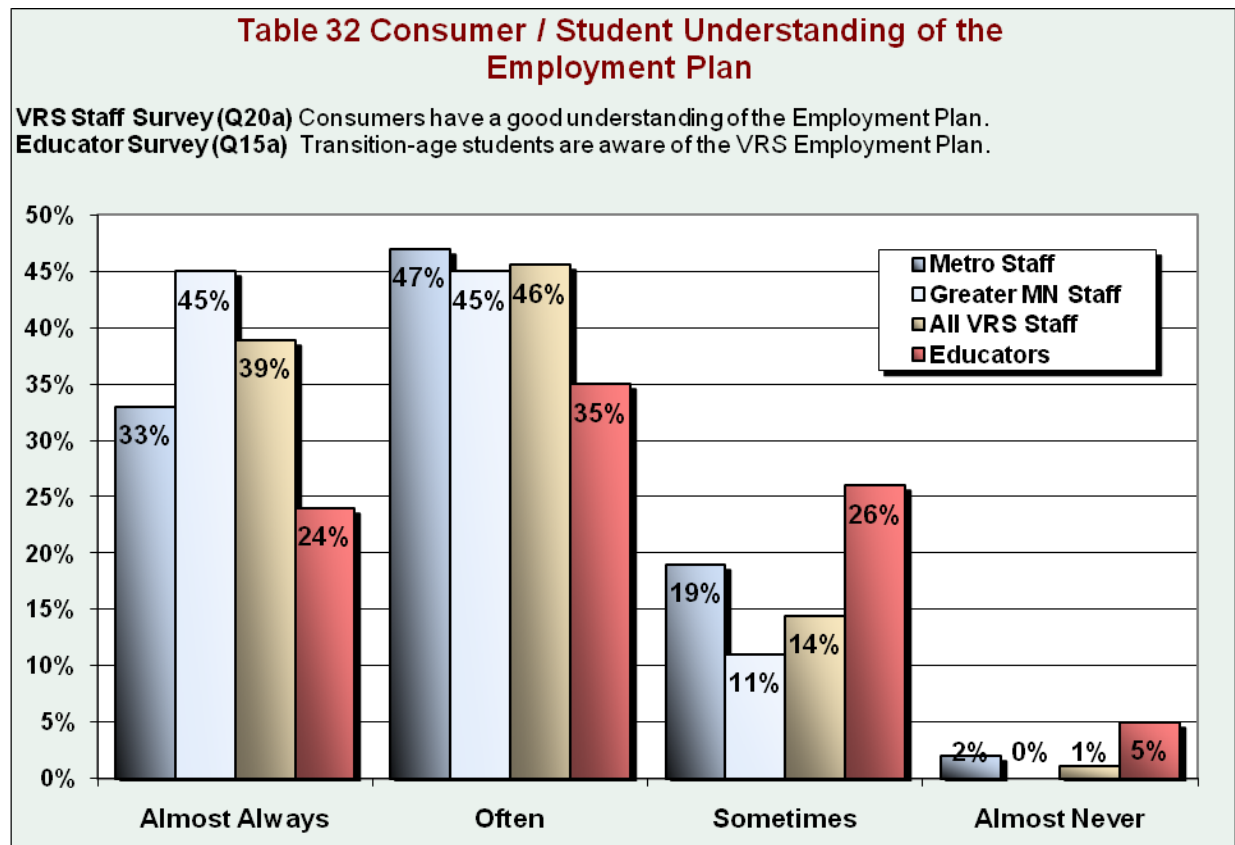
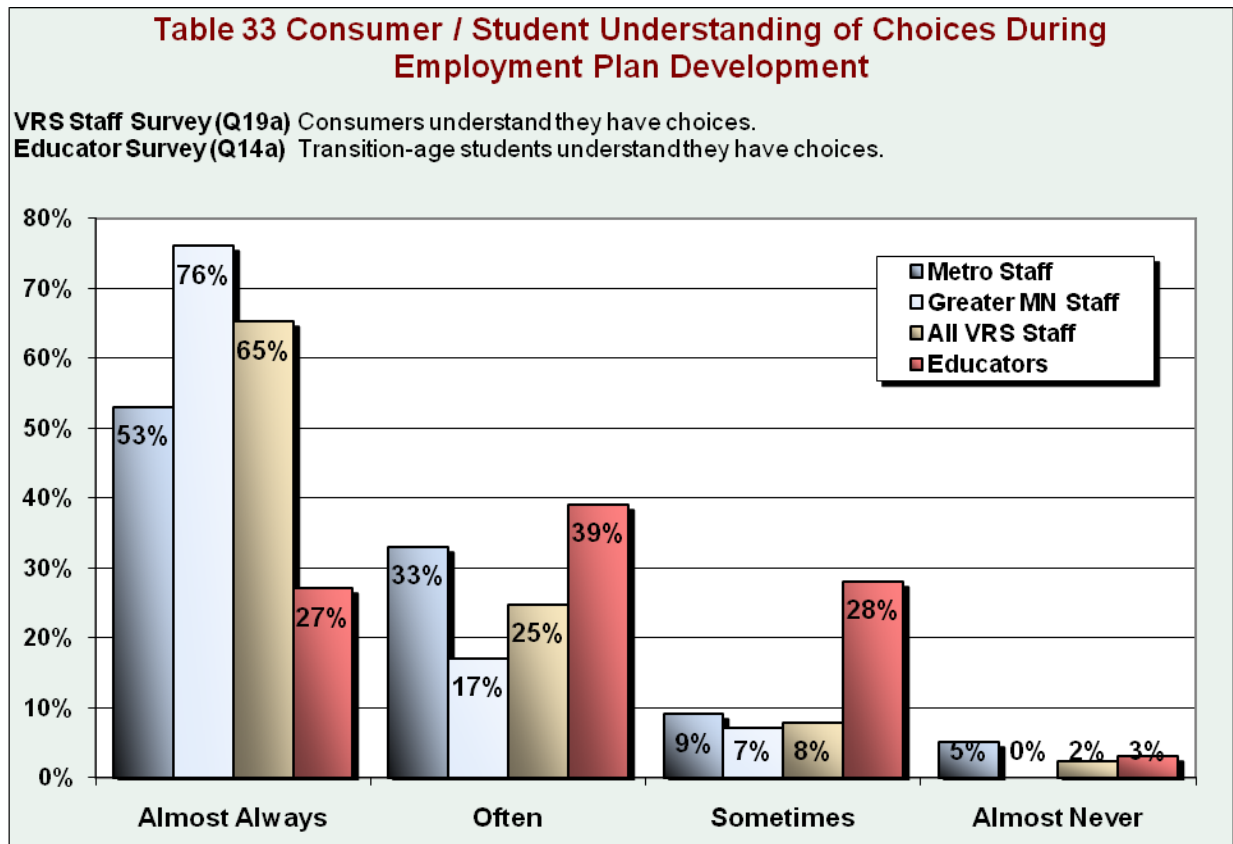
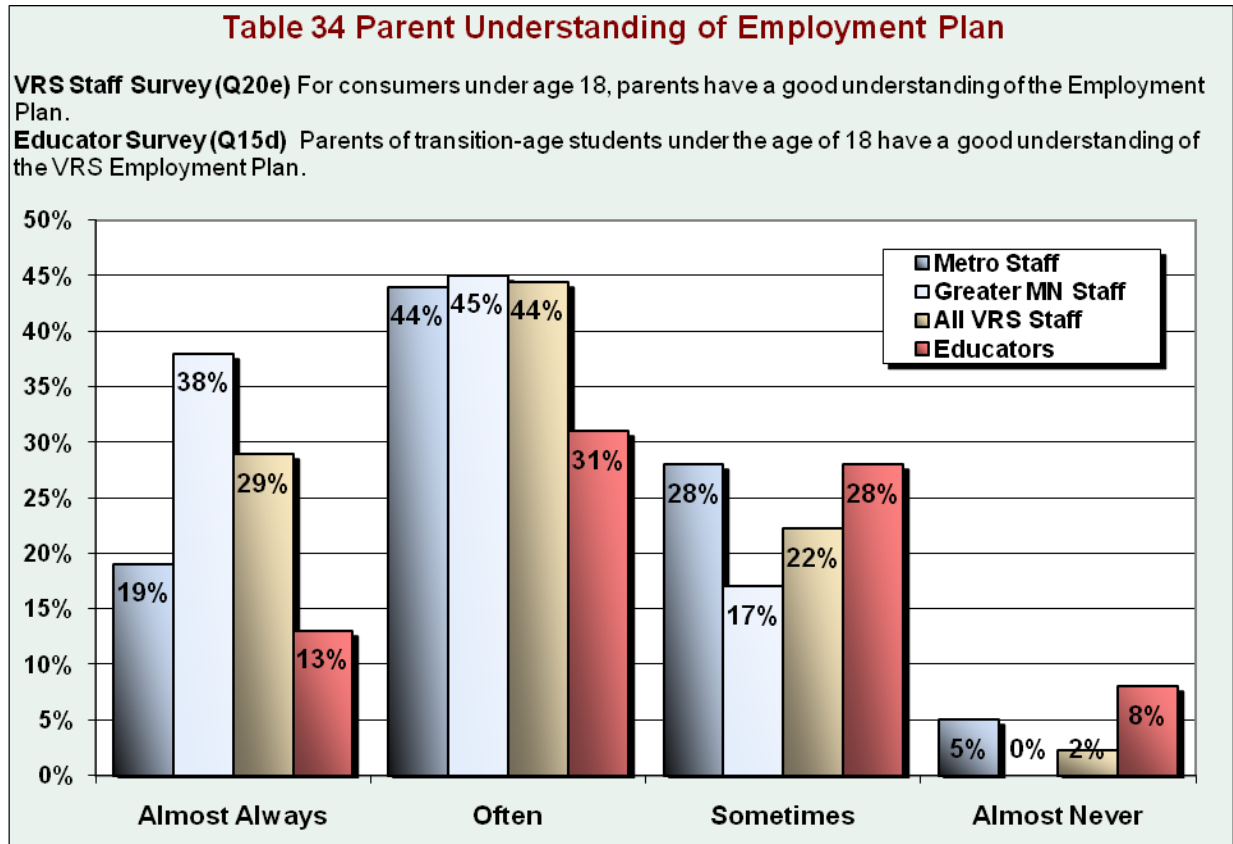


Table 33 indicates the proportions of respondents perceiving transition-age consumers/students' understanding of choices. Almost all VRS staff (90%) thought that, *Almost Always* or *Often*, transition-age consumers understood they have choices in developing the Employment Plan, while only 66% of the educators had a similar understanding.



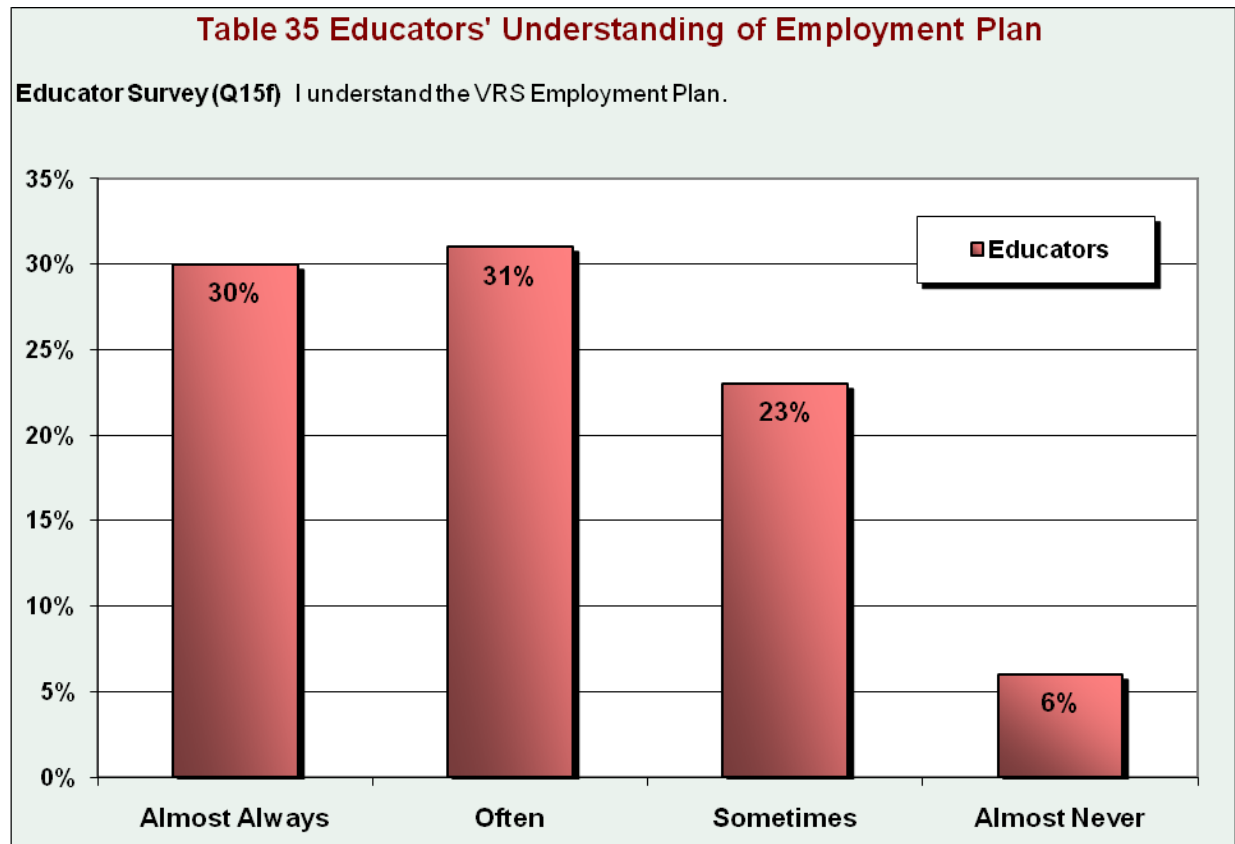
## Parents

Table 34 indicates the proportions of VRS staff and educators who described their perception of parental understanding of the Employment Plan. Much higher proportions of VRS staff (75%) than educators (44%) thought that, *Almost Always* or *Often*, that parents understood the Employment Plan.



## *Educators*

Table 35 indicates the proportions of educators who indicated understanding the Employment Plan. Almost equal proportions of educators indicated understanding the Employment Plan *Almost Always* (30%) or *Often* (31%).



*Educator: Cognitively I understand it but I rarely see it.*

### ***Expression / Incorporation of Interests / Strengths***

A critical criterion of a good Employment Plan has to do with the ability of the Employment Plan: to incorporate transition-age consumer/student interests (Table 36); to incorporate student/transition-age consumer strengths (Table 37); and to allow for expression of student/transition-age consumer vocational interests (Table 38).

Table 36 indicates that *Almost Always* or *Often*, 86% of VRS staff and 63% of the educators thought that transition-age consumers/students' interests are *fully incorporated into the VRS Employment Plan*.

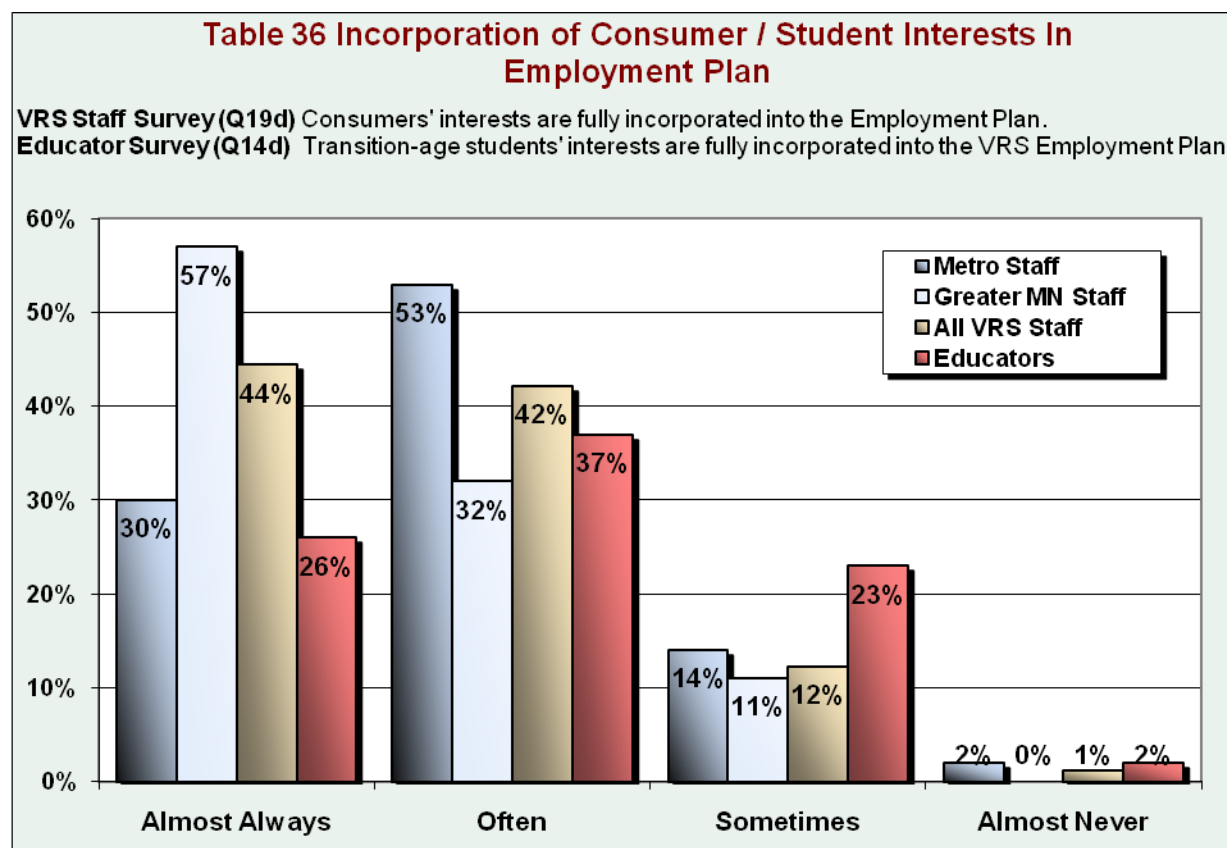




Table 37 indicates that *Almost Always* or *Often* 87% of VRS staff and 65% of the educators thought that transition-age consumers/students' *strengths are fully incorporated into the VRS Employment Plan*.

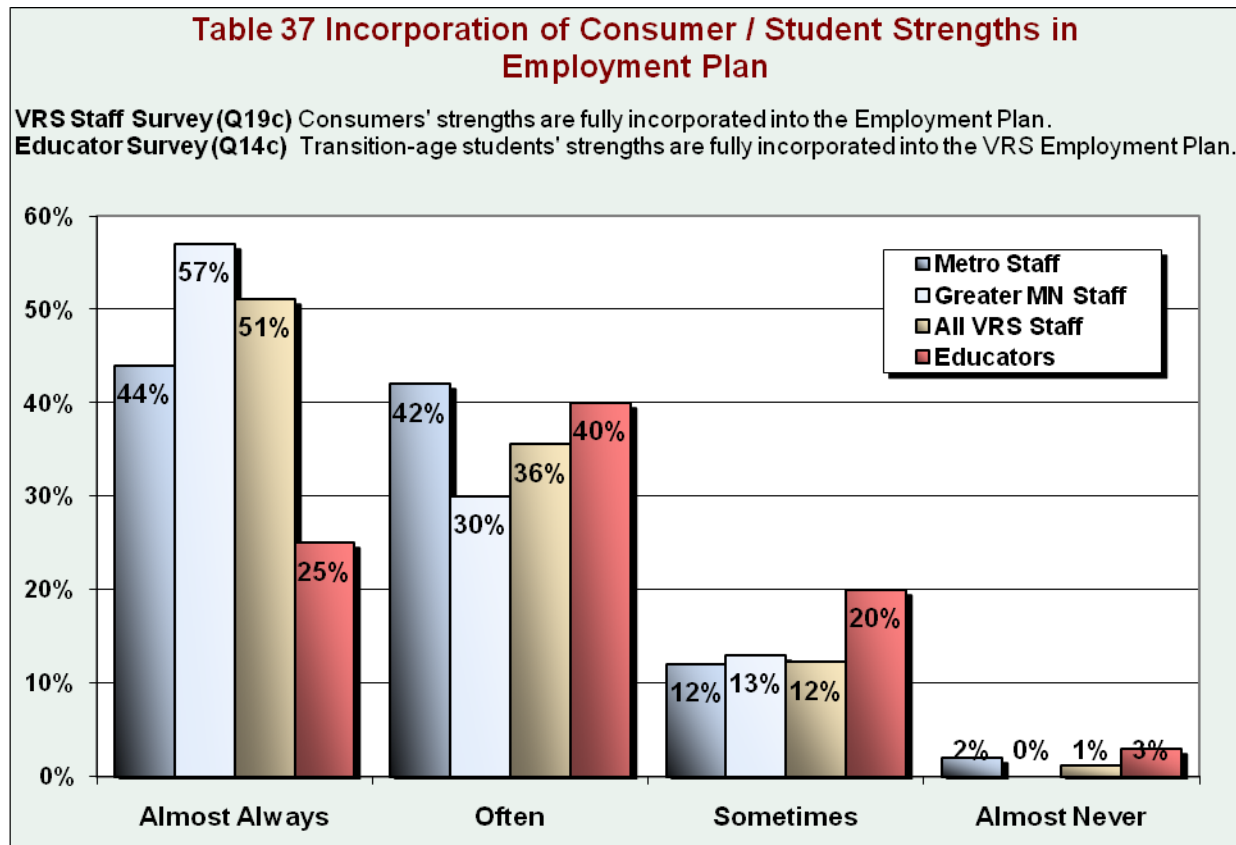
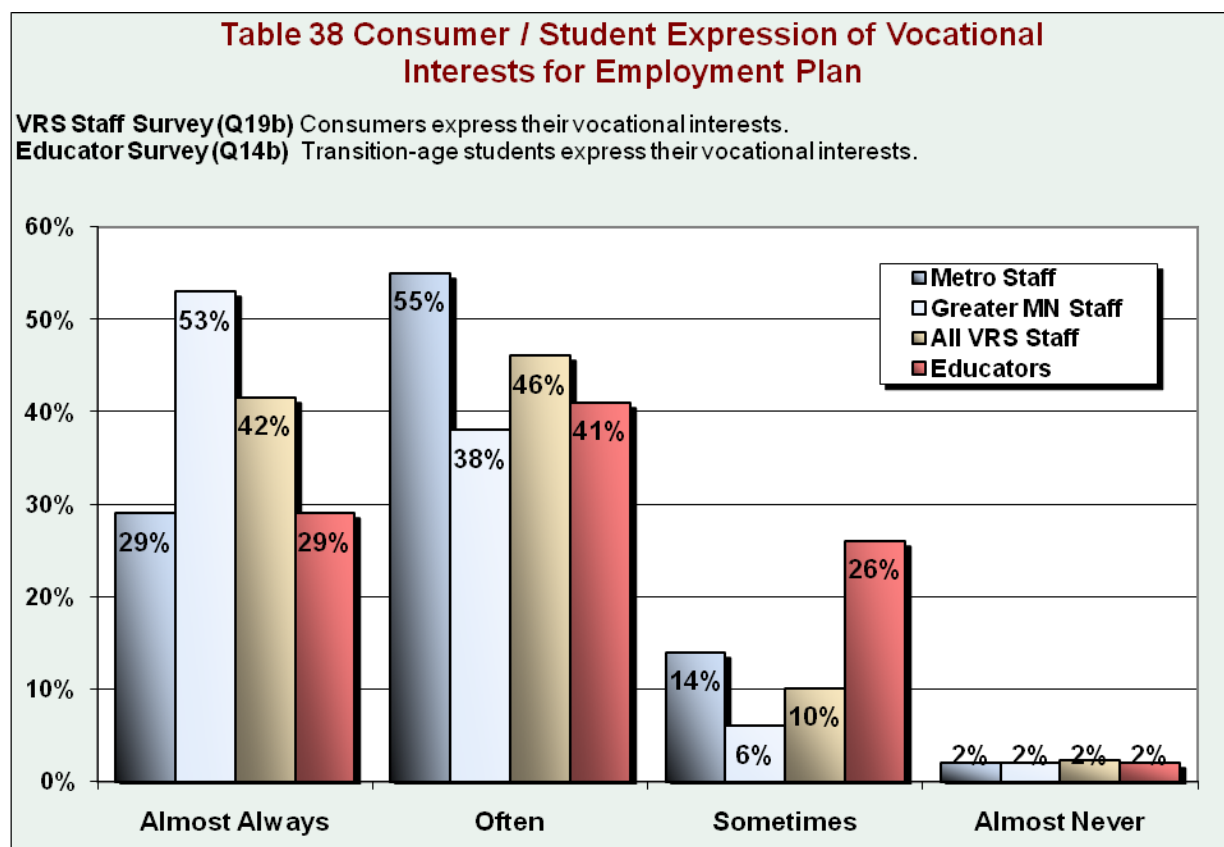


Table 38 indicates that *Almost Always* or *Often*, 88% of VRS staff and 70% of the educators thought that transition-age consumers/students *express their vocational interests* in the Employment Plan.



***VRS staff: The employment plan solidifies their goals and helps with direction for school choice, disability information, and community resources.***

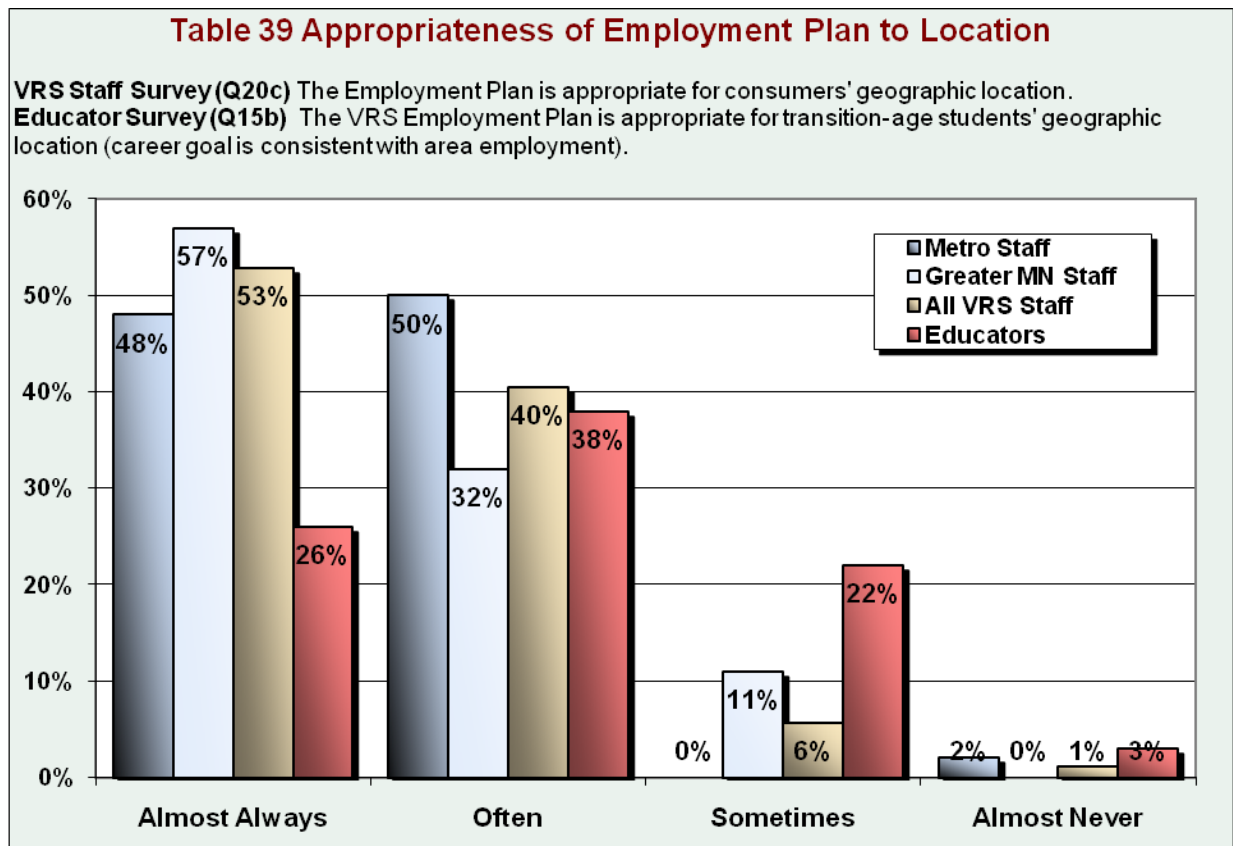
***VRS staff: Skills/abilities and interests of the student are utilized in plan. RS staff/educators' knowledge used throughout the process, with student benefitting as a result.***

### ***Clarity of Services and Financial Contribution***

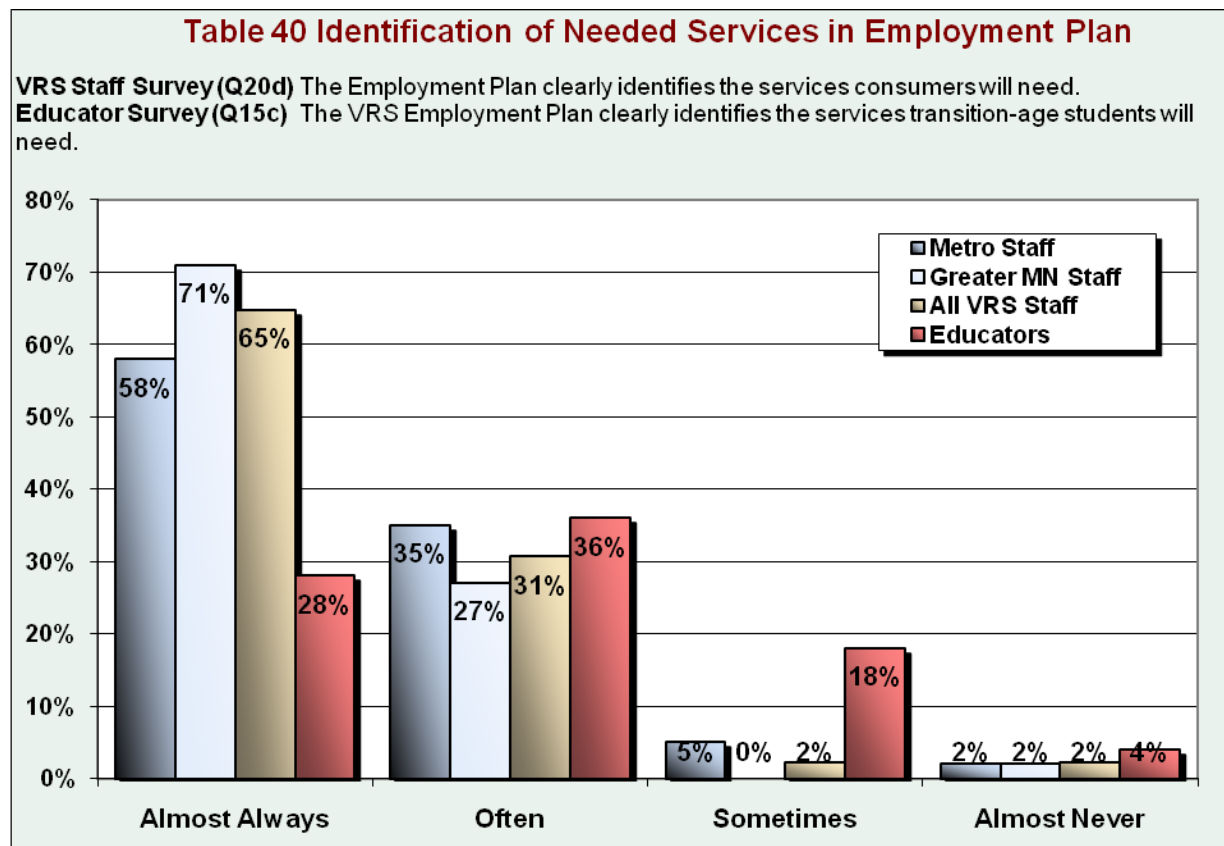
A good Plan needs clarity, especially when it involves costs. The online surveys addressed several aspects: Is the Employment Plan consistent with the vocational opportunities in the transition-age consumer/student's geographical area (Table 39)? Are the services needed by the transition-age consumer/student clearly delineated (Table 40)? Do transition-age consumers/students (Table 41) and parents (Table 42) know their expected financial contribution?

***VRS staff: It gives the consumer and the RS staff a 'blueprint' to work from in getting a consumer to their job goal. Consumers go away knowing exactly what the plan is, means, and understands the purpose of the plan.***

We asked VRS staff and educators whether they thought the Employment Plan was appropriate for area employment opportunities. Table 39 indicates that a much greater percentage of VRS staff (93%) than educators (64%) thought the *VRS Employment Plan is appropriate for transition-age consumers/students' geographic location*.



We also asked if the Employment Plan clearly identified the services a transition-age consumer/student would need. Table 40 indicates that practically all VRS staff (96%), and 64% of educators thought that, *Almost Always* or *Often*, the *Employment Plan* clearly identifies the services transition-age consumers/ students will need.



Finally, the surveys asked VRS staff and educators whether transition-age consumers/students and their parents were aware of their Expected Financial Contribution to the cost of services specified in the Employment Plan. The Expected Financial Contribution is the portion of the cost of services that the consumers and families have responsibility to pay. Table 41 indicates that VRS staff thought that, *Almost Always* or *Often*, transition-age consumers knew their Expected Financial Contribution.

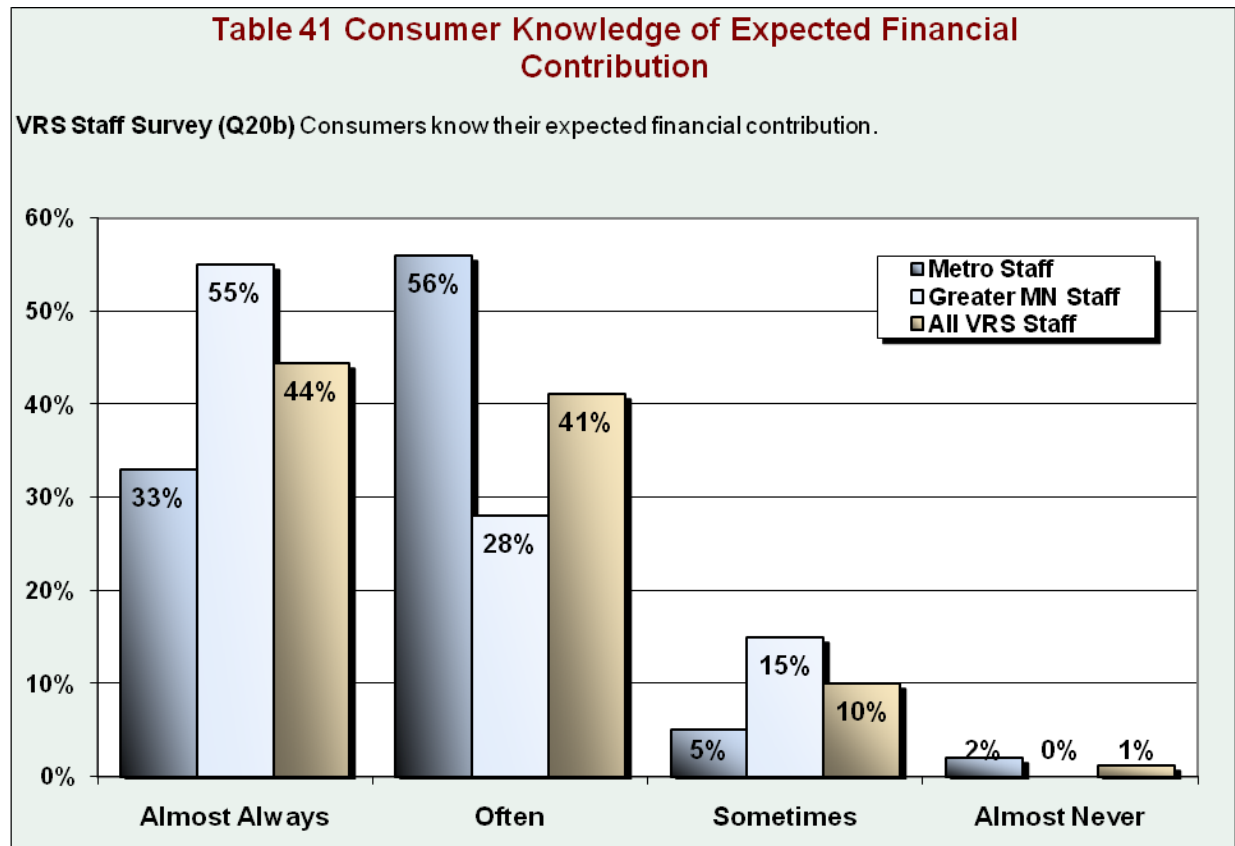
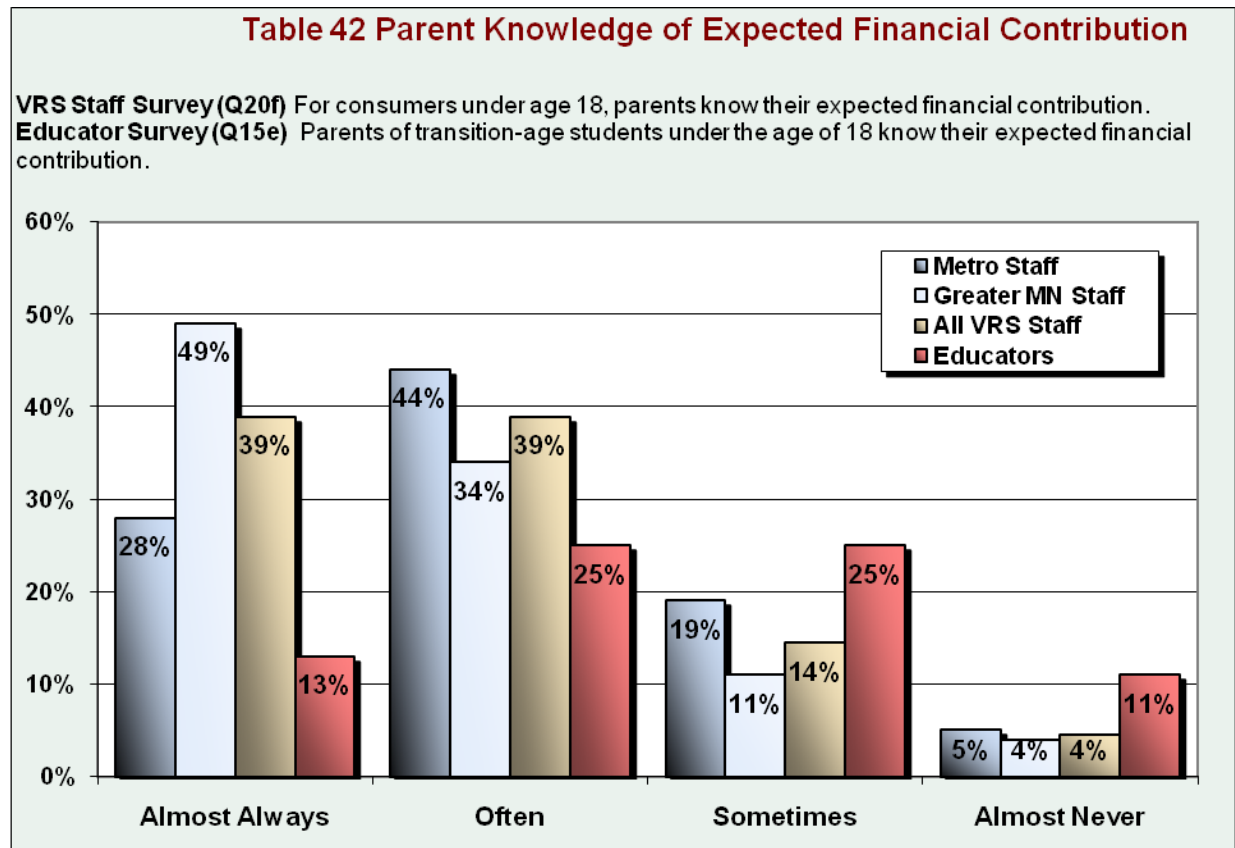


Table 42 indicates that double the percentage of VRS staff (78%) than educators 38% believe that parents are informed of their Expected Financial Contribution.

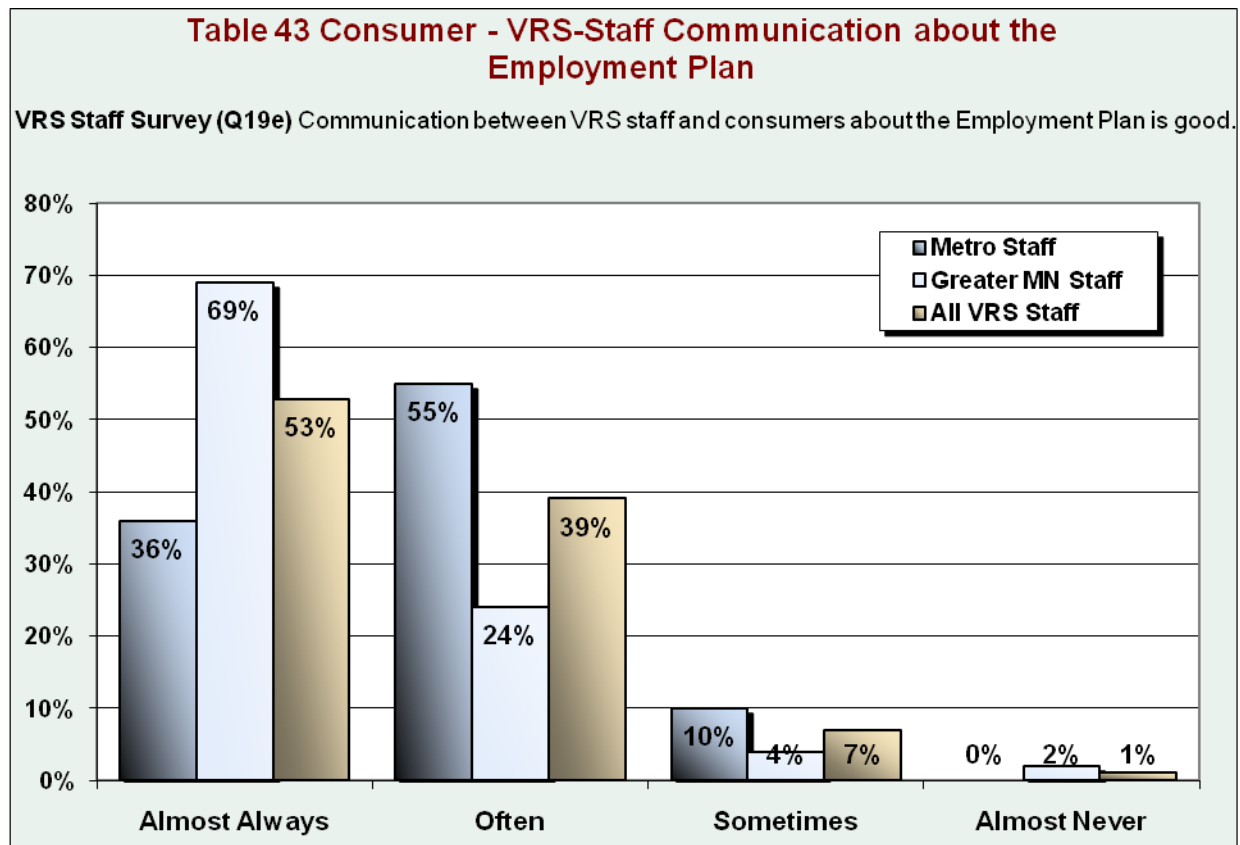


## Communication / Coordination

VRS Staff and educators offered their perceptions on the occurrence of different aspects of communication and coordination during the process of developing the Employment Plan. Ideally, VRS Staff ought to be in communication with transition-age consumers/students, educators, community rehabilitation programs (CRP's), and postsecondary education staff during the course of the development of the Plan.

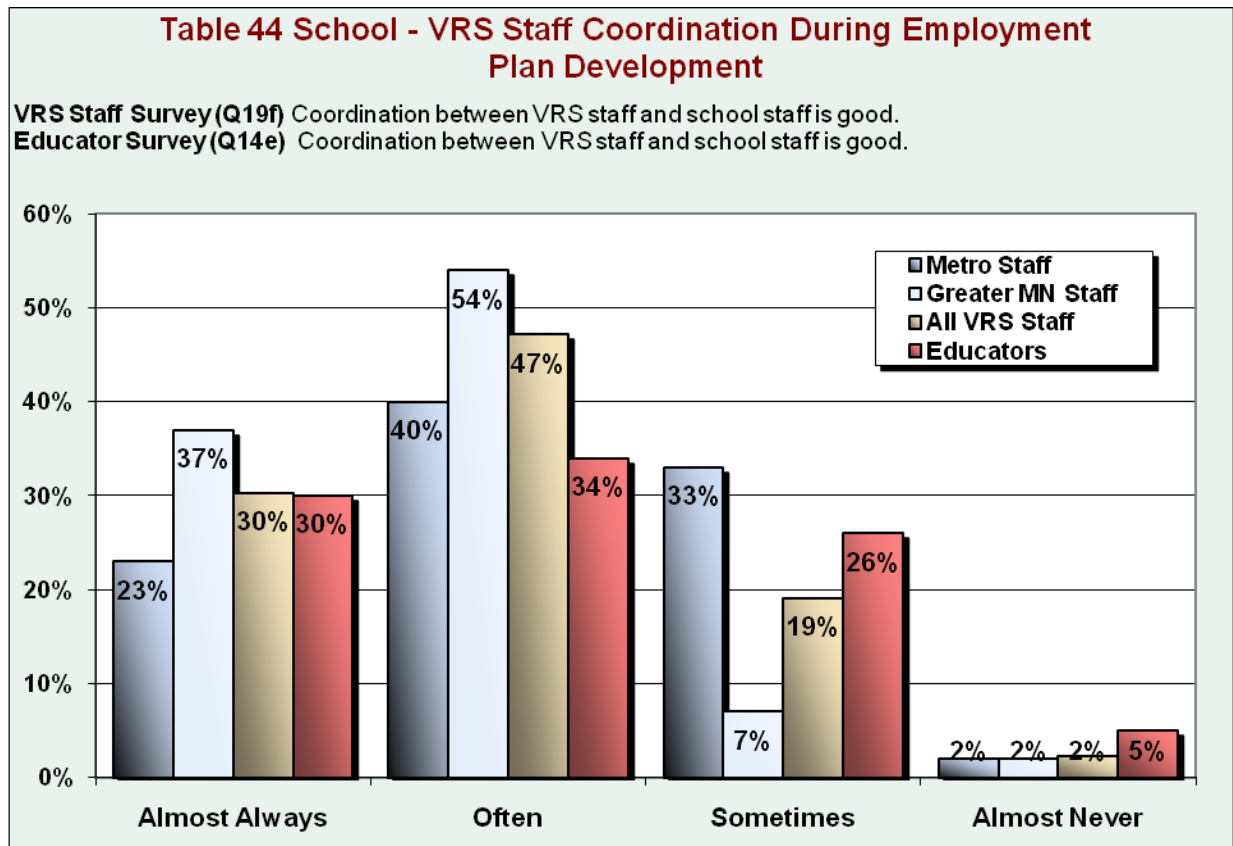
### *VRS – Transition-age Consumer / Student Communication (Table 43)*

VRS staff indicated how frequently communication during the development of the Employment Plan could be characterized as good. Almost all (92%) of VRS staff indicated that *Almost Always* or *Often* it was good, with meaningful differences between *Metro Staff* and *Greater MN Staff*.



### VRS Staff - Educators Coordination (Table 44)

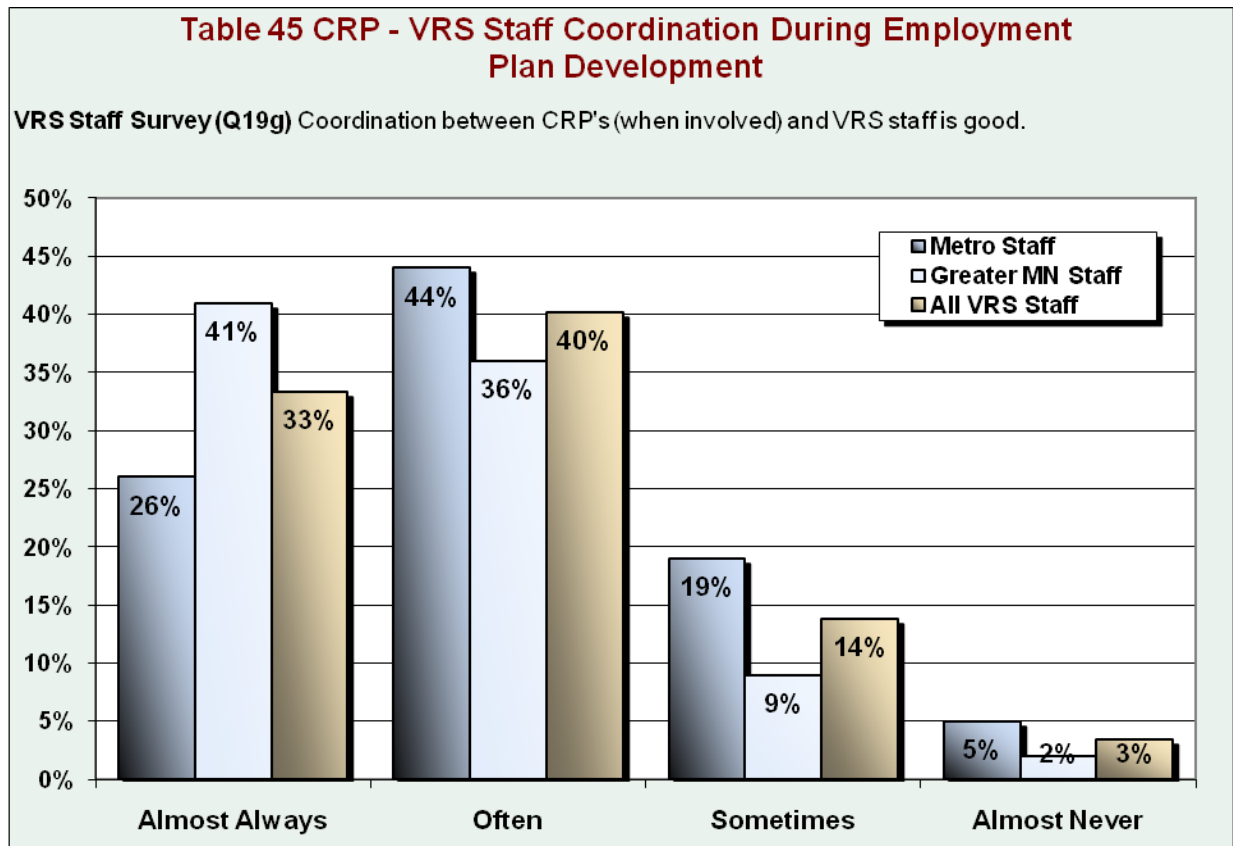
VRS staff and educators described coordination between VRS and educators during development of the Employment Plan. Slightly higher proportions of VRS staff (77%) than educators (64%) indicated that, *Almost Always* or *Often*, coordination during the development of the Employment Plan was good. Again, differences among *Metro Staff* and *Greater MN Staff* were noticed.





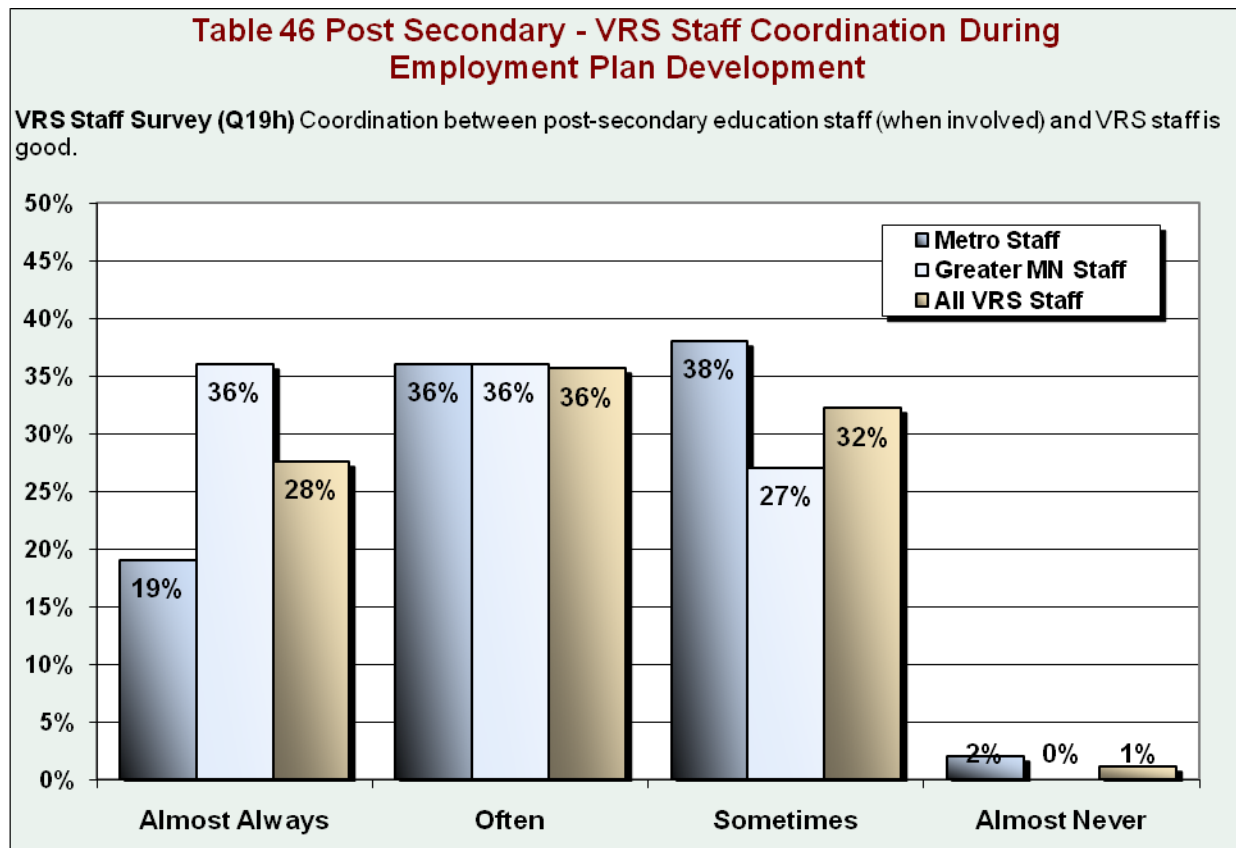
### VRS Staff - CRP Coordination (Table 45)

Employment Plans are likely to include having a CRP provide some of the services. VRS Staff described their coordination with CRP's during the development of Employment Plans, and upwards of 70% of VRS staff indicated that good coordination occurred *Almost Always* or *Often*, with meaningful differences between *Metro Staff* and *Greater MN Staff*.



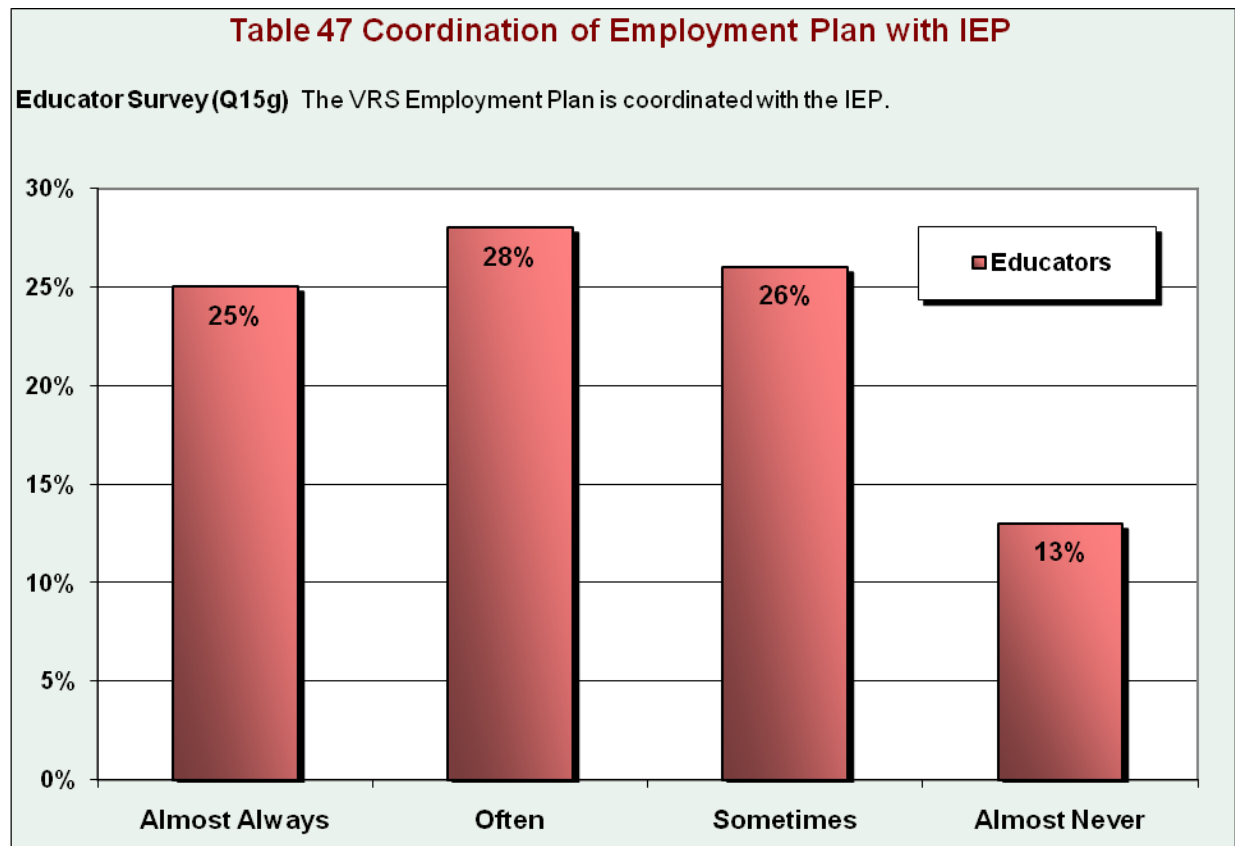
### VRS Staff - Postsecondary Education Staff Coordination (Table 46)

Postsecondary educational institutions are also likely to be part of an Employment Plan. VRS staff noted how often good coordination existed with those institutions during the development of Employment Plans. Although 64% of VRS staff noted there being good coordination between postsecondary education staff and VRS staff, it was lower than for other aspects of communication and coordination. Again there were meaningful differences between the *Metro Staff* and *Greater MN Staff* groups.



### **Coordination with IEP**

Education and VRS have respective plans that serve to delineate the services each organization will provide. We had already asked VRS staff and educators about the involvement of VRS staff in development of the IEP which occurs early in the process. Therefore, we asked educators about the degree of coordination with the Employment Plan with the IEP (Table 47). About a quarter of the educators (25%) indicated that it was *Almost Always* coordinated with the IEP, while almost equal proportions thought it was *Often* (28%) coordinated with the IEP or thought that Sometimes it was coordinated with the IEP (26%). A remarkable 13% thought that coordination occurred *Almost Never*.



***VRS staff: Students participate in the writing of the plan.***

***VRS staff: Consumer involvement is the strongest part of the plan.***

***VRS staff: The weakest part is coordinating with parents for students under 18.***

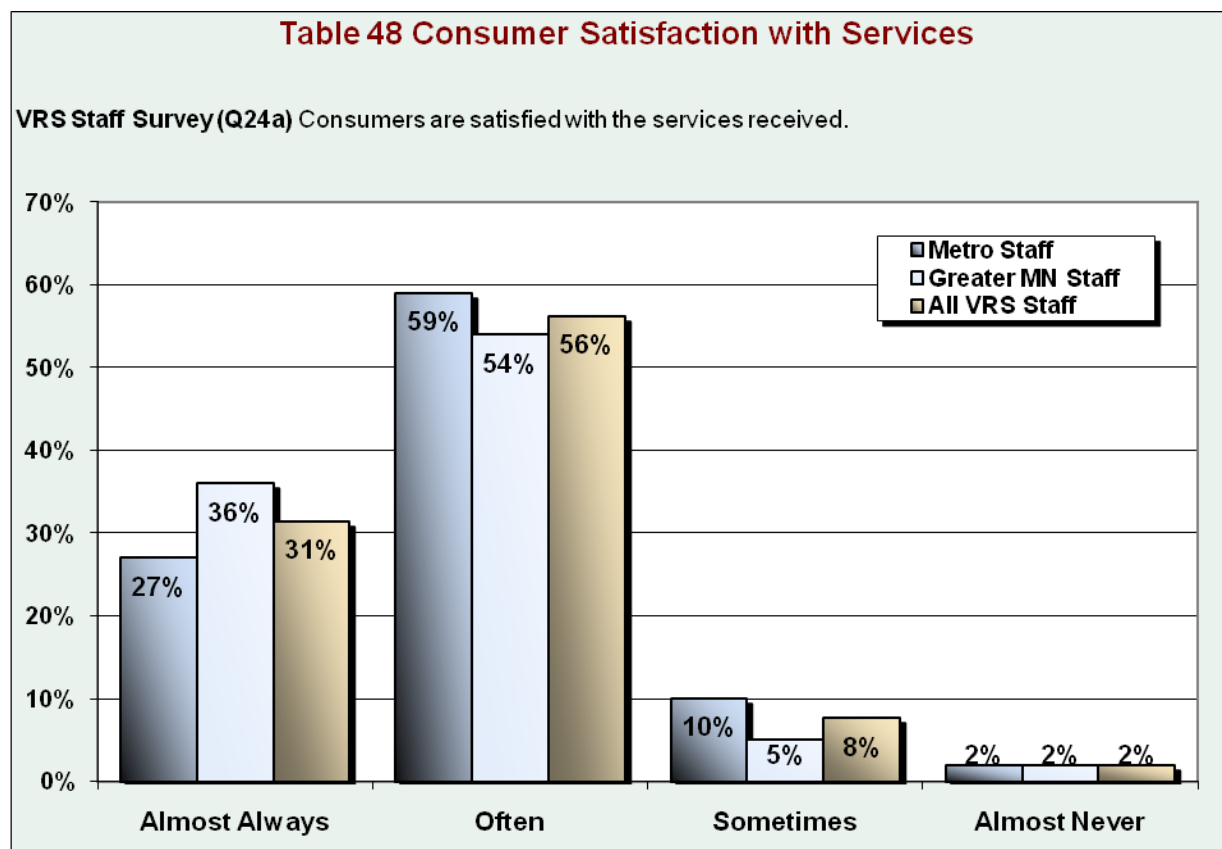
## Outcomes of Services: Perceptions and Effect?

### ***Transition-Age Consumer Satisfaction***

The online surveys sought the perceptions of VRS staff on several aspects of the whole program: transition-age consumer satisfaction; transition-age consumer development; and the effect of level of resources on successful transition-age consumer outcomes. These questions were primarily directed toward VRS staff because transition-age consumers usually leave secondary education before VRS begins to purchase services for them. Transition-age consumers' cases are not usually closed or completed until a significant time after the transition-age consumer has left secondary education and secondary educators would have no frame of reference to respond to questions asking for a consideration of the whole process of receiving services.

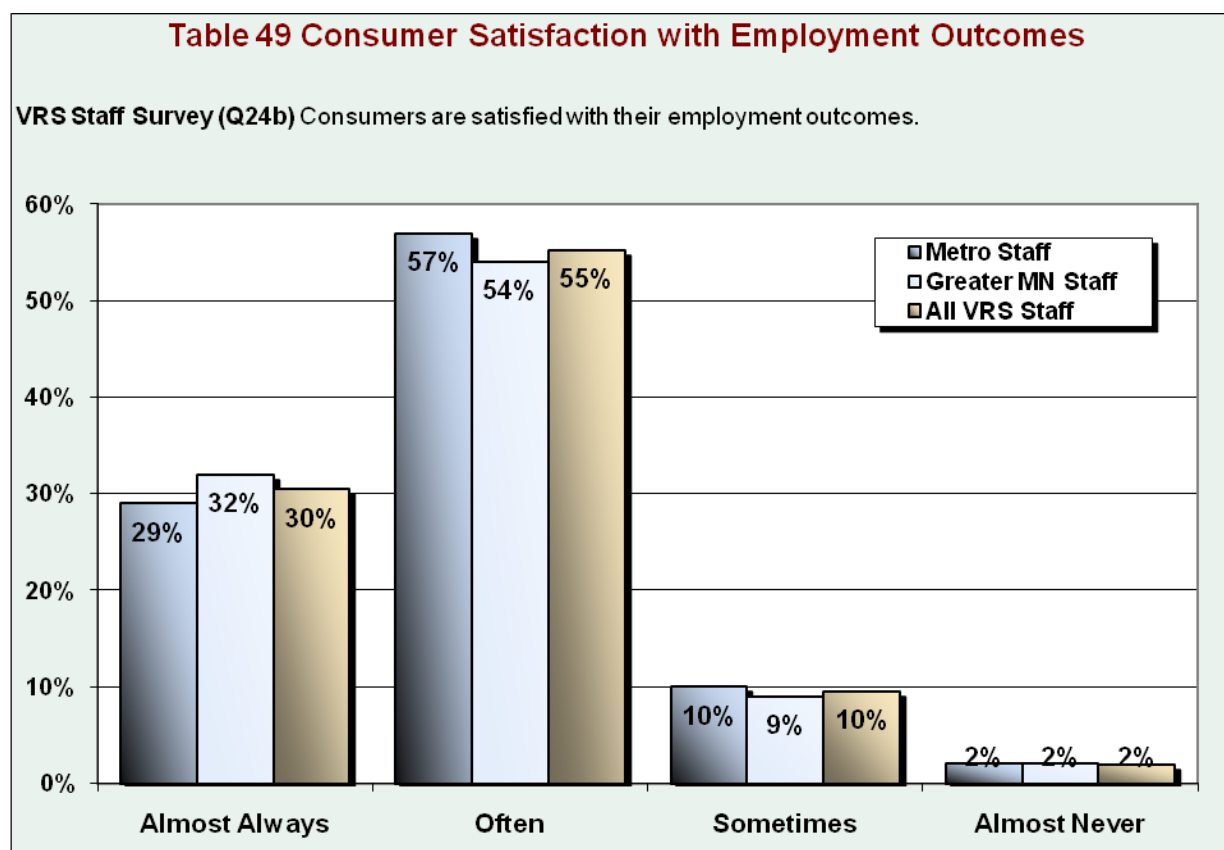
#### *Satisfaction with Services (Table 48)*

Were consumers satisfied with the services they received? A total of 87% of VRS staff *Almost Always* or *Often* thought transition-age consumers were satisfied. Differences between *Metro Staff* and *Greater MN Staff* were low.



### *Satisfaction with Employment Outcomes (Table 49)*

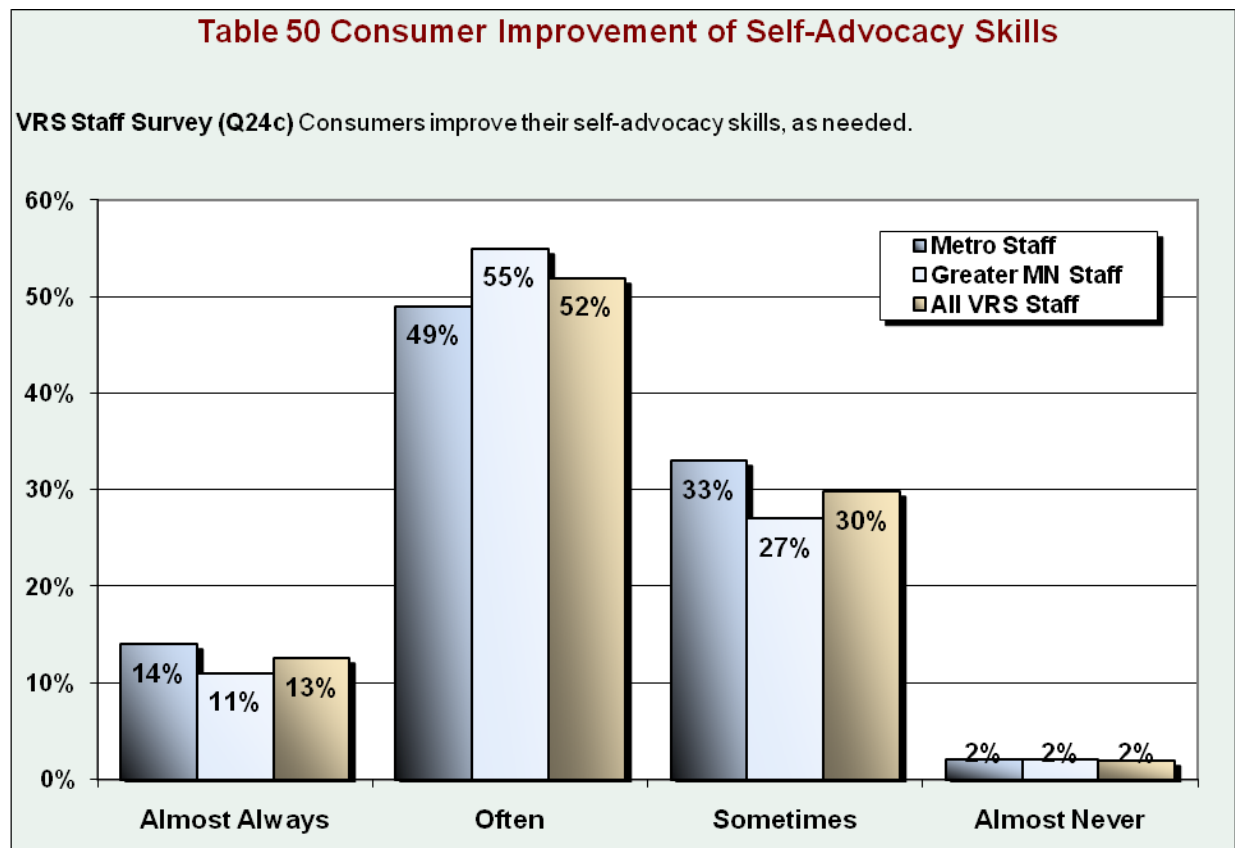
Transition-age consumers receive services with the goal of employment, so VRS Staff were asked how often transition-age consumers were satisfied with their employment outcome. A total of 85% of VRS staff *Almost Always* or *Often* thought transition-age consumers were satisfied with their employment outcomes. Differences between geographical staff groups were unremarkable.



***Educator: I feel that our rs/vr counselor does a good job at meeting our students employment needs.***

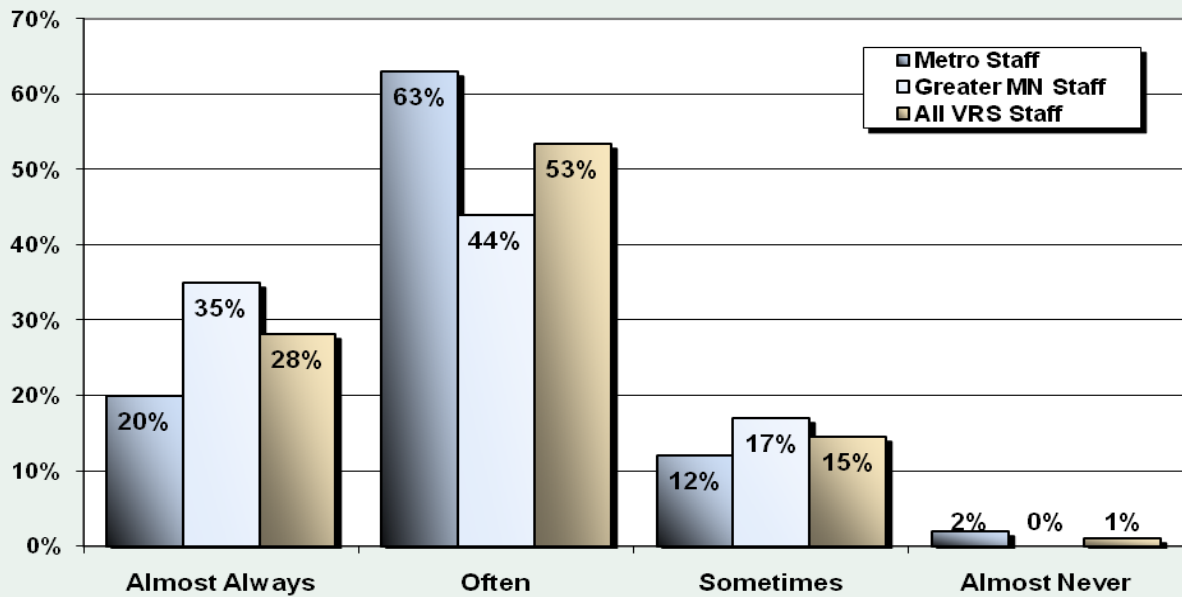
### Personal Development

It is reasonable to assume that developing the skills and ability to secure employment will positively affect a transition-age consumer's personal development. There was interest whether transition-age consumers developed the ability to advocate for themselves (Table 50), developed a greater awareness of their personal strengths (Table 51), or came to feel more independent (Table 52).



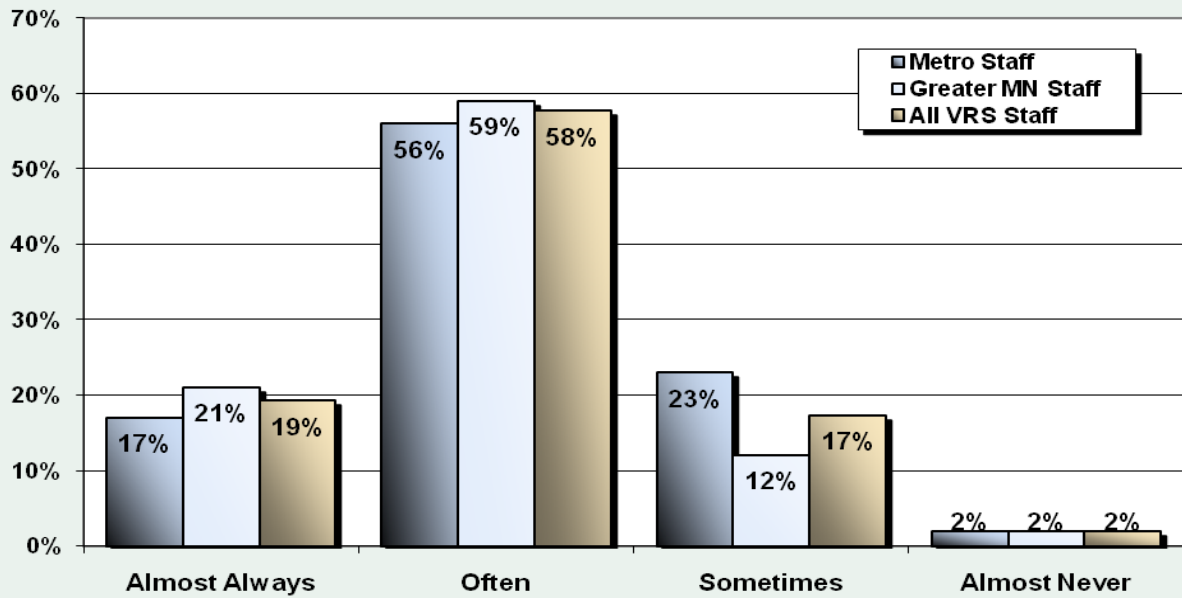
**Table 51 Consumer Knowledge of Personal Strengths**

**VRS Staff Survey (Q24d)** Consumers improve their knowledge of personal strengths, as needed.



**Table 52 Consumer Ability to be Independent**

**VRS Staff Survey (Q24e)** Consumers improve their ability to be independent, as needed.



Without much difference between the Greater MN and Metro area VRS staff groups, upwards of 65% of VRS staff indicated that *Almost Always* or *Often* transition-age consumers improved their skills to advocate for themselves, with the greater proportion of each group indicating that it occurred *Often* rather than *Almost Always*.

***Educator: Developmentally, many students this age have difficulty advocating for themselves and getting the most out of DRS requires good advocacy skills. A never ending challenge as a sp ed teacher in the high school.***

With some greater internal differences, 81% of VRS staff thought that *Almost Always* or *Often*, transition-age consumers improve their knowledge of strengths. Table 52 indicates that 77% of VRS staff *Almost Always* or *Often*, with very low internal differences, thought *Transition-age consumers improve their ability to be independent*.

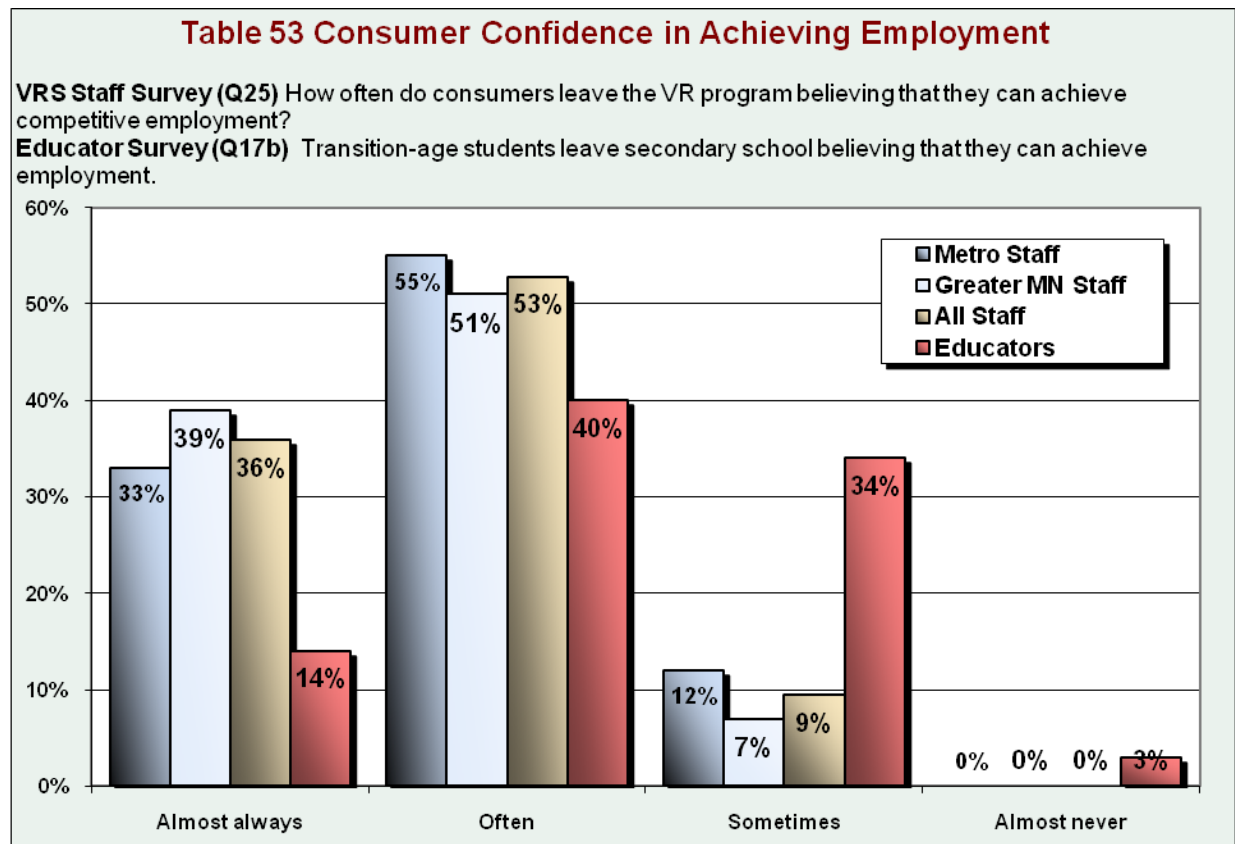


## Employment

Educators noted the availability of employment supports when transition-age students leave secondary school (Table 54) and VRS staff and educators described transition-age consumer confidence in achieving employment (Table 53).

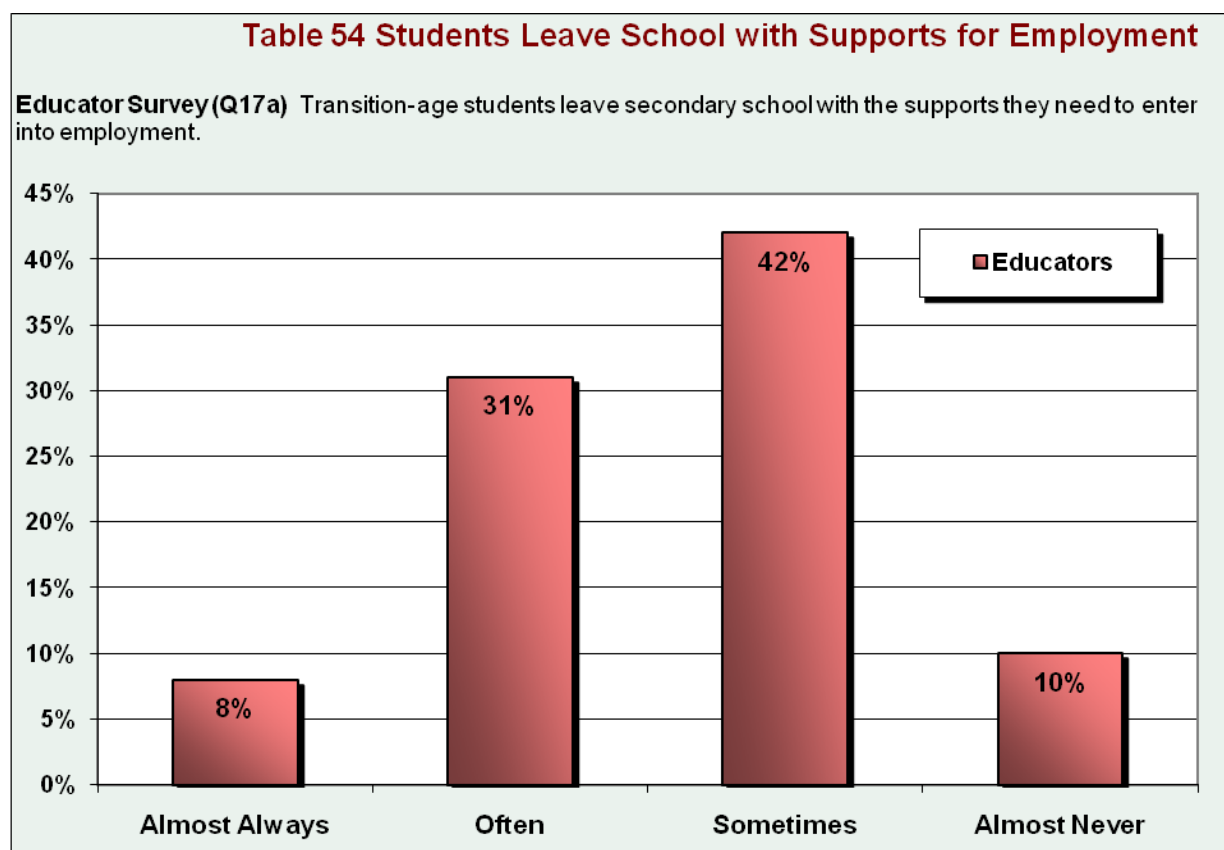
### *Achievability of Employment (Table 53)*

Do transition-age consumers leave the program thinking that they can achieve employment? Much greater proportions of VRS staff (89%) than educators (54%) thought this occurred.



### Support for Employment (Table 54)

Although transition-age consumers/students may think they can achieve employment, when they leave secondary school do they have the supports that they need to enter into employment? Only 8% of educators thought this occurred *Almost Always* and 31% thought it occurred *Often*. A total of 10% thought this happened *Almost Never*.

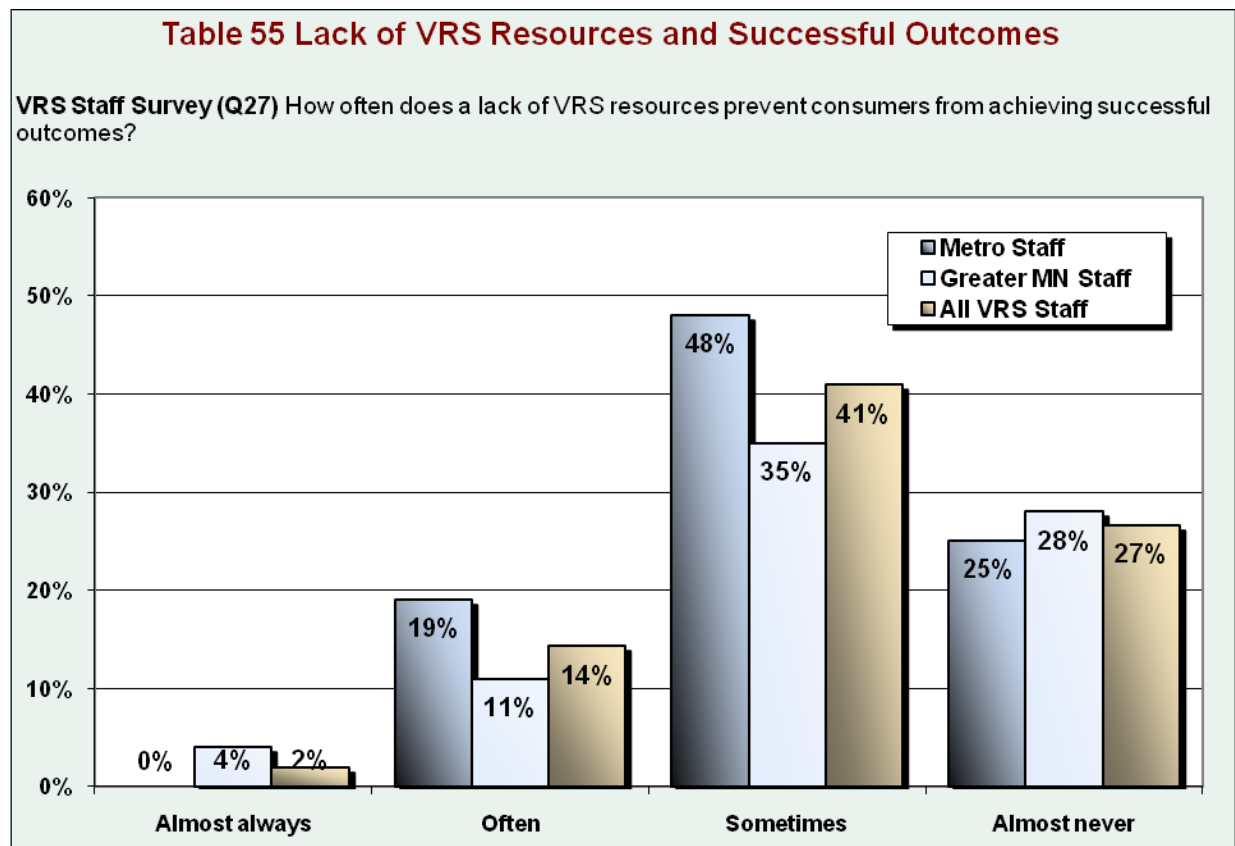


***Educator: EXCELLENT! For families and students who are willing to be players in their transition, I think DRS is an excellent program.***

## Barriers

### Resources (Table 55)

While there are many factors that enter into a transition-age consumer/student being able to achieve employment, VRS staff reflected upon how often a lack of resources from VRS prevented transition-age consumers/students from achieving employment. A negligible total of 2% thought this occurred *Almost Always*, while 14% indicated they thought it occurred *Often*, and 41% said it happened *Sometimes*, but 27% thought this occurred *Almost Never*.



## **Analysis of the Data**

Transition-age consumers, parents, educators and VRS Staff discussed and responded to specific questions about the process through which a transition-age consumer proceeds in learning about, applying for, planning and receiving services from VRS. Each group was only asked about aspects in which there was a reasonable expectation that they had knowledge to contribute. For example, educators were not questioned about employment outcomes because those events normally occur after the transition-age consumer has completed and/or left secondary education.

The data were analyzed in two stages. The primary analysis considered the data from each respondent group for each stage of the data-gathering process (i.e., Orientation, Vocational Assessment, Career Exploration, Employment Plan, and Outcomes). The secondary level of the analysis compared and contrasted the data of a specific stage among all those who contributed. This allowed us to compare, for example, the responses from a transition-age consumer about developing an Employment Plan with the perceptions of parents, educators and VRS staff.

### **Understanding VRS**

#### **Transition-Age Consumers**

The transition-age consumers who participated in the focus groups had applied for services, had been approved for services, had developed Employment Plans, and in some cases, had successfully completed their Employment Plans. However not all of them were highly aware of VRS as a distinct organization or its purpose.

Transition-age consumers should learn about VRS while in secondary education. They usually have an Individualized Education Program (IEP) and a VRS counselor or other VRS staff person will be invited to a meeting to plan or assess the progress of an IEP. We noted a broad range of familiarity and understanding of VRS among the transition-age consumers. Too often there were misunderstandings. Hearing the 'rehabilitation' term of VRS could lead to thinking of addictive behavior and the need for 'rehab'-type activities. Common misunderstandings about the purpose of VRS involved a transition-age consumer only being aware of a part of the purpose of VRS. Comments from transition-age consumers included, 'Finding a job' or perceiving VRS as 'help with school (postsecondary).'

Sometimes transition-age consumers failed to distinguish VRS from other divisions of the Minnesota Workforce Center System, referring to VRS, the organization that was in the process of providing them with services as 'Workforce.' Although it is a goal of organizations offering complimentary services strive to have a seamless connection with the other organizations, in this case, the transition-age consumer had had enough contact with VRS to know the name of the organization.

#### **Parents**

Parents displayed a much greater awareness, than transition-age consumers, of understanding VRS and its purpose. The parents who attended the focus groups were highly interested in the services their children were receiving, in contrast to how they

were characterized by VRS staff and educators in the online surveys as persons who were difficult with whom to communicate. The parents continually demonstrated their interest in obtaining information and their desire to share and learn. During, but especially after a focus group session, the parents would remain in the discussion room, or just outside, engaging in impromptu networking sessions about strategies, tactics, or just general information necessary to navigate children through the seas of human services, in general, and VRS, specifically.

The parents described introductory experiences with VRS that spanned a continuum from being introduced to VRS by educators to being the one to introduce VRS to educators. While it was normal for parents to learn about VRS through participation at a child's IEP meeting, parents who had moved between different school districts commented that they observed substantive differences between the different districts in the way each introduced VRS to parents.

Parents confided and discussed their feelings when learning about VRS. They envisioned receiving assistance with postsecondary education from VRS as well as securing employment outcomes for their children, but also viewed VRS with *hope*. They perceived VRS as a potential *lifeline* for them as their child was about to leave secondary education for the *real* world.

### **VRS Staff**

VRS staff are engaged, daily, in implementing the mission of VRS. The data indicate that they often perform their jobs in the face of misunderstanding of the purpose of VRS, in spite of not always being included at the onset of a transition-age student's educational/vocational planning, and without optimal parental involvement. In their estimation, *Almost Always* or *Often*:

- 66% thought transition-age consumers had a general understanding of what VRS does;
- 61% thought parents had a general understanding of what VRS does;
- 82% were involved when transition-age consumers and parents are oriented to VRS;
- 44% were involved 'early enough' in the IEP process;
- 65% had educators rely upon their expertise;
- 71% communicated well with transition-age consumers during orientation;
- 41% communicated well with parents during orientation; and
- 66% coordinated well with educators during orientation.

According to their online survey responses, during the time transition-age consumers are learning about VRS, high proportions (82%) of VRS staff reported that

they are involved *Almost Always or Often* with transition-age consumers and their parents, and think they communicate well with the transition-age consumers (71%), with lower proportions having the same level of communication with parents (41%). A high proportion of VRS staff *Almost Always or Often* noted that transition-age consumers (66%) and their parents (61%) develop a general understanding of VRS and what it can do for them.

High proportions of VRS staff perceived that *Almost Always or Often* educators relied upon their expertise during the development of an IEP (65%), and they experienced good coordination (66%) with educators, but lower proportions of VRS staff felt that *Almost Always or Often* they were involved *early enough* in the IEP process (44%).

### **Educators**

High proportions of the educators expressed satisfaction with being able to work with VRS staff in a cooperative, seamless manner to plan programs for transition-age consumers. Lower proportions were noted that VRS staff to get involved *early enough* with students' programs. In their estimation, *Almost Always or Often*:

- 42% thought transition-age consumers had a general understanding of what VRS does;
- 42% thought parents has a general understanding of what VRS does;
- 71% were involved when transition-age consumers and parents are oriented to VRS;
- 59% though VRS staff were involved 'early enough' in the IEP process;
- 66% thought they benefitted from participation of VRS staff;
- 62% thought communication was good between VRS staff and transition students;
- 44% thought communication was good between VRS staff and parents; and
- 65% coordinated well with VRS staff.

High proportions of educators were likely to perceive that they were involved with transition-age consumers and parents during the orientation to VRS period (71%) and noticed good communication between VRS staff and transition-age consumers (62%). However, lower proportions of educators perceived good communications between VRS staff and parents (44%), or that transition-age consumers (42%) and parents (42%) had a good understanding of VRS.

High proportions of educators (65%) commented that they were well coordinated with VRS staff during the orientation stage, and that they, the educators, benefitted from the participation of VRS staff (65%). However, educators were almost evenly split on

whether VRS staff were *Almost Always or Often* involved *early enough* in the IEP process (59%).

## **Vocational Assessment**

### **Transition-Age Consumers**

VRS uses a variety of methods for vocational assessments of transition-age consumers. Methods range from VRS reviewing pre-existing data from a school system, VRS conducting the assessment, or sending the student to an external contractor for an intensive, multi-day assessment. Or, the assessment could consist of a combination of data and activities between those points of the continuum. Depending on the assessment method used for a particular transition-age consumer, varying comments from a transition-age consumer could be expected, ranging from an exclamation of 'What assessment?' to a detailed analysis of what was good and what was not.

Transition-age consumer satisfaction with assessments was related more to the manner in which the assessment was presented and used by VRS staff than with the actual results. VRS could use the assessment to make conclusions that were markedly different from a transition-age consumer's preferences without the consumer feeling highly dissatisfied if VRS demonstrated personal attention, guidance and/or assistance. When VRS reached an assessment conclusion that differed from a transition-age consumer's interest, it was not always an unsolvable situation if the VRS staff made efforts at explaining and accommodating the transition-age consumer. Dissatisfaction would occur when a transition-age consumer felt VRS staff were not interested, independent of the assessment results. In the case of a transition-age consumer not having a strong vocational desire, lack of an assessment decision could become reason for dissatisfaction later on, when a transition-age consumer might feel that he/she was without direction and then blame VRS.

VRS staff needed to proceed cautiously, determining the strength of a transition-age consumer's interests, and to what extent the transition-age consumer needed structure or freedom for transition-age consumers to feel satisfied about an assessment. The need of the transition-age consumer to feel that VRS was personally interested is what was consistently related to satisfaction.

### **Parents**

Parents demonstrated a range of opinions of vocational assessments. Parent satisfaction, as for transition-age consumers, was related to the perception of whether VRS staff demonstrated an interest in, or actually helped a child. Parent satisfaction, and the perception of a child's satisfaction was definitely a function of the parents' perception of VRS staff interest and effort.

Parents communicated an understanding of the critical junction in life for their children, and were cognizant of the crisis-like nature of vocational decision-making and their children's relatively low knowledge of choices. Parents seemed to realize that VRS staff might not initially understand their child's interests because the child did not have that understanding, or that it was in a crude, formative stage. Overall, parents communicated a need for VRS staff to be involved with a child over a period of time in

order to be able to accurately assess and offer guidance for vocational decisions. It was this involvement through which VRS staff could demonstrate interest in the transition-age consumer and satisfy parents.

### **VRS Staff**

VRS staff conduct a vocational assessment of each transition-age consumer as part of the process of developing an individualized Employment Plan in which the transition-age consumer's needs and interests are linked to an employment goal. Accomplishing this task requires involvement with the transition-age consumer, as well as communication and coordination with educators and, as needed, other professionals and organizations. VRS staff responded to numerous survey items on vocational assessments. The responses indicated that *Almost Always* or *Often*:

- 80% reported being involved with vocational assessments of transition-age consumers;
- 60% thought transition-age consumers understood the purpose of the assessments;
- 71% thought parents understood the purpose of the assessments;
- 67% thought transition-age consumers understood the results of the assessments;
- 63% thought parents understood the results of the assessments;
- 85% thought their communication with transition-age consumers was good;
- 63% thought their communication with parents was good; and
- 85% thought their coordination with educators was good.

High proportions of VRS staff reported *Almost Always* or *Often* being involved in the assessment process (80%), and were optimistic that they communicated well with transition-age consumers (85%) and parents(63%), resulting in high proportions thinking that *Almost Always* or *Often* transition-age consumers (60%) and parents (63%) being aware of and understanding the results of the assessments. High proportions of VRS staff also perceived that *Almost Always* or *Often* there were good coordination between themselves and educators (85%).

### **Educators**

In most cases, vocational assessments are conducted with the coordination and assistance of educators. Often, educators can share valuable information they have already gathered on transition-age consumers with VRS staff. Educators responded to many of the same questions on vocational assessments as did VRS staff, as well as a question on their awareness of the vocational assessment process. In the proportions indicated below, they indicated that *Almost Always* or *Often* the following occurred:



- 53% reported being aware of the VRS vocational assessment process;
- 47% reported being involved with transition students during vocational assessments;
- 53% thought transition-age consumers understood the purpose of the assessments;
- 53% thought parents understood the purpose of the assessments;
- 62% thought transition-age consumers understood the results of the assessments;
- 59% thought parents understood the results of the assessments;
- 61% thought communication of VRS staff with transition students was good;
- 50% thought their communication of VRS staff with parents was good; and
- 66% thought their coordination with VRS staff was good.

About two out of three educators (66%) reflected that *Almost Always or Often* there was good coordination with VRS staff during assessments, but lower proportions supported other aspects of vocational assessments as VRS staff. Only medium proportions of educators thought that *Almost Always or Often* transition-age consumers (53%) and parents (53%) understood the purpose of vocational assessments, with somewhat higher proportions thinking transition-age consumers (62%) and parents (59%) understood the results of vocational assessments. Slightly higher proportions of the educators perceived that *Almost Always or Often* there were good communication between VRS staff and transition-age consumers (61%), but they were again almost equally split on the question of good communications between VRS staff and parents (50%).

## **Career Exploration**

### **Transition-Age Consumers**

Transition-age consumers with well-defined career interests were apt to engage in exploration on their own and those consumers tended to be more satisfied with the support they received from VRS and their VRS counselors. As in other phases of the process, satisfaction for all the transition-age consumers was linked to the perception of VRS counselors' interest or willingness to listen to them. Transition-age consumers would become dissatisfied when they perceived that the counselor rejected their interest without giving it fair consideration, not when there was a difference of opinion between consumer and counselor.

Emanating from satisfaction due to personal interest by VRS staff were two themes associated with dissatisfaction. One was the perception of transition-age

consumers that VRS wanted them to just get a job, not caring whether it was one related to their assessment or interests, and the second was rejection of self-employment interests. When transition-age consumers perceived VRS staff as uninterested, it was easy for the transition-age consumers to conclude that VRS just wanted to place them in any job, which lead to expressions of dissatisfaction. Similarly, when transition-age consumers suggested self-employment, without a high degree of involvement by VRS staff to explain the need to develop a business plan and have access to resources, it was easy for the transition-age consumers to be dissatisfied due to what seemed to be an abrupt rejection.

As in all counselor-transition-age consumer interactions, actual availability of the counselor, as measured in time to respond to messages and to schedule an appointment, was a strong determinant of satisfaction. The response time by the counselor was perceived as an indicator of the level of interest VRS staff had in a transition-age consumer.

Transition-age consumers were willing to tolerate and accept differences of opinion. Their satisfaction hinged on their perception of the actual interest VRS staff expressed in them, personally.

### **Parents**

Parents seemed to focus on employment in the present, rather than viewing it as an exploratory experience leading to a career in the future, but were also able to maintain their awareness of their child's personal interests. Parents seemed to assume that it was their responsibility to assist their child with employment and postsecondary education, and were easily satisfied when VRS staff provided insight and assistance in either employment or postsecondary education.

Parents also described frustration and dissatisfaction with in regard to communication and personal interest. If parents did not clearly understand, or VRS did not concisely communicate with parents, parents were not aware of exactly what to expect of VRS. Second, just as for the transition-age consumers, parents became dissatisfied when they did not perceive personal interest by VRS staff in their child's case. An example of the latter was associated with parents' perception of VRS to place the consumer in an employment situation that was unrelated to consumer interest or assessment data.

For the most part, parents were highly motivated to help their child, were satisfied with almost any assistance VRS provided, but communicated a sense of frustration with VRS for not giving them a full understanding of possible resources, ideas, suggestions or alternatives.

### **VRS Staff**

During career exploration, transition-age consumers have an opportunity to learn about the jobs or careers in which they have been assessed to have an affinity or aptitude, or in which they have expressed an interest. Career exploration is an application of the vocational assessment, and often requires communication and

coordination by VRS staff with educators and others, as well as a high level of involvement and understanding by VRS staff.

VRS staff responded to questions about whether VRS provides transition-age consumers with labor market information, and opportunities to get employment experiences that reflect their transition-age consumers' interests. VRS staff also described their communication and coordination with transition-age consumers, parents, educators and postsecondary education staff. The indicated proportions perceived that *Almost Always or Often*, the following occurred:

- 75% were involved with transition-age consumers during career exploration;
- 67% noted that VRS provides transition-age consumers with adequate labor market information;
- 40% noted that VRS provides parents with adequate labor market information;
- 37% noted transition-age consumers have an opportunity for work experience;
- 48% indicated that transition-age consumers could fully express their career interests;
- 86% perceived communications with transition-age consumers were good;
- 53% perceived communications with parents were good;
- 80% perceived coordination with educators was good; and
- 60% perceived coordination with postsecondary staff was good.

Three out of four VRS staff (75%) responding to the online survey noted that *Almost Always or Often* they were involved with transition-age consumers during their exploratory experiences. High proportions (67%) thought that *Almost Always or Often* transition-age consumers were provided with adequate labor market information, and that *Almost Always or Often* communication between VRS staff and transition-age consumers (86%), and educators (80%) was good. Medium high proportions of VRS staff (60%) thought that *Almost Always or Often* coordination with postsecondary education staff was good.

Only about half of VRS staff (53%) thought *Almost Always or Often* communication with parents was good, and less than half (40%) thought that *Almost Always or Often* parents received adequate labor market information.

Indicating that employment is a difficult activity, only about half of VRS staff (48%) thought that *Almost Always or Often*, transition-age consumers were able to fully express career interests in exploratory experiences or that *Almost Always or Often* have an opportunity for work experiences (37%).

## **Educators**

Ideally, VRS staff cooperate with educators to develop the Employment Plan, insuring that the Employment Plan and the IEP will be complimentary. Career exploration is a VRS process in which transition-age consumers will apply vocational assessment information to explore and develop insight into working, and different jobs and careers in order to identify an employment goal in their Employment Plan. Educators supplement the transition-age consumer's career exploration.

Educators responded to online survey questions that were similar to those asked of VRS staff, but from the perspective of a group that was complimentary to the process. The proportions indicated below are those who *Almost Always* or *Often* noted the following:

- 69% are involved with transition students while in career exploration;
- 35% perceived VRS providing transition students adequate labor market information;
- 32% perceived VRS providing parents adequate labor market information;
- 76% felt transition students were able to express their career interests in exploration;
- 55% noticed good communication between VRS staff and transition students; and
- 58% indicated coordination between VRS staff and educators was good.

A solid proportion of educators (69%) were *Almost Always* or *Often* involved with the transition-age consumers in career exploration, and an even larger proportion (76%) thought that *Almost Always* or *Often* those consumers were able to express their career interests during exploration. Very low proportions of educators felt that *Almost Always* or *Often* VRS provided adequate labor market to transition-age consumers (35%) or parents (32%), while a moderate proportion thought that *Almost Always* or *Often* VRS staff had good communication with transition-age consumers (55%) or good coordination with educators (58%).

## **Employment Plan**

### **Transition-Age Consumers**

It was discouraging to hear transition-age consumers remark, '...what plan?' when asked about their Employment Plan. The Employment Plan provides all involved with the framework of services for transition-age consumers. Transition-age consumers experience assessments and career exploration to identify an employment goal and the services they will need to attain the goal. Once the Plan is approved, it is the defining document for the provision of services to the transition-age consumers. The

Employment Plan is the contract between VRS and the transition-age consumer or and/or parents (depending upon the age of the consumer).

VRS uses the Employment Plan to justify all of its service-related decisions, and it is assumed that because transition-age consumers and/or parents sign the document, that they are aware of it. We found that transition-age consumers and/or parents did not always demonstrate a high level of awareness.

It was noted that transition-age consumer satisfaction was related to demonstration of personal interest by VRS staff toward a consumer. When a transition-age consumer felt VRS staff, in general, and a counselor, in particular, were open to being contacted and were open to entering into discussions, transition-age consumers were more apt to express satisfaction, the explicit nature of the Employment notwithstanding.

The determinant of transition-age consumer satisfaction at this stage, as with other stages, was a function of the personal attention each consumer received from VRS staff, especially the counselor.

### **Parents**

Parents responded to questions about their child's Employment Plan in much the same way as the transition-age consumers. Many of the parents kept files of all of the documents of their child's VRS case and could still be unaware of the Employment Plan, or its fundamental nature in the provision of services.

Parents also expressed a certain level of fear of the Employment Plan, thinking it would expire and leave their child without services.

It was important to parents to have a caring VRS counselor work with their child. The absence of a Plan, or not knowing about a Plan was of lower importance. If parents perceived their child's counselor as someone who devoted time to their child's case and expressed personal concern for their child, they tended to be satisfied.

### **VRS Staff**

VRS staff activities with transition-age consumers are structured by the development and implementation of a consumer's Employment Plan. While the transition-age consumer is in secondary education, VRS staff and the transition-age consumer, with assistance from educators and other external staff and organizations, acquaint the transition-age consumer with VRS, assess the transition-age consumer's interests, assist in the identification of the transition-age consumer's employment goal and identify and agree upon the services the transition-age consumer will receive. Once the Employment Plan has been developed, it is the principal reference for most questions a transition-age consumer may have regarding services.

VRS staff responded to questions on the online survey about: their involvement with transition-age consumers; transition-age consumer and parent understanding of the Employment Plan; incorporation and expression of transition-age consumer strengths and interests in the Employment Plan; geographical relevance of the Employment Plan; services in the Employment Plan; transition-age consumer/parent

expected financial contribution for services in the Employment Plan; and communication and coordination between VRS and the transition-age consumer, educators, CRP's, and postsecondary education staff. A total of 77% of the VRS staff indicated they were involved *A Great Deal* or *Some*, during the time when the Plan was developed.

In their estimation, *Almost Always* or *Often*:

- 85% thought transition-age consumers had a *good understanding* of the Employment Plan;
- 90% thought transition-age consumers understood that they had choices in developing the Plan;
- 73% thought parents had a *good understanding* of the Employment Plan;
- 86% thought the Employment Plan fully incorporated transition-age consumer interests;
- 87% thought the Employment Plan fully incorporated transition-age consumer strengths;
- 88% thought the Employment Plan allowed transition-age consumer expression of vocational interests;
- 93% thought the Employment Plan was appropriate for the geographic location;
- 96% thought the Employment Plan identified the *services transition-age consumers will need*;
- 85% thought transition-age consumers knew their expected financial contribution;
- 78% thought parents knew their expected financial contribution;
- 92% thought *communication between VRS staff and transition-age consumers ...is good*;
- 77% thought *coordination between VRS staff and educators is good*;
- 73% thought *coordination between CRP's and VRS staff is good*; and
- 64% thought *coordination between postsecondary education staff and VRS staff is good*.

High proportions of VRS staff were very positive about transition-age consumer participation in developing the Employment Plan. Very high proportions of VRS staff (85%) *Almost Always* or *Often* noted transition-age consumers having a *good understanding* of the Employment Plan and understanding that they had choices in

developing the Plan (90%). Equally high proportions of VRS staff *Almost Always or Often* noted the ability of the Plan to incorporate transition-age consumer interests (86%) and strengths (87%), and to allow transition-age consumers to express their vocational interests (88%). Practically all VRS staff *Almost Always or Often* thought the Plan contained the services a transition-age consumer needed (96%), and that it was appropriate for the transition-age consumer's geographical area (93%), meaning that the employment goal was consistent with employment opportunities in the area.

Almost all VRS staff thought that *Almost Always or Often* communication with transition-age consumers while developing the Plan was good (92%), and about three out of four VRS staff thought that *Almost Always or Often* communication (77%) and coordination with educators (77%) and CRP's (73%) was good. About two out of three VRS staff perceived that *Almost Always or Often* coordination with postsecondary staff was good (64%).

### **Educators**

The Employment Plan is coordinated with the IEP, making educators a complimentary partner in the development of the Employment Plan similar to their role in career exploration. The Employment Plan is a VRS document, involving interactions between VRS staff, especially the VRS counselor, with the transition-age consumer and parents. Educators can be highly involved with the development of the Plan, due to their involvement with transition-age consumers during the development of the Plan, and the need of VRS to coordinate the Employment Plan with the transition-age consumer's IEP, and their observations are relevant. A total of 31% of the educators indicated they were involved *A Great Deal or Some*, during the time when the Plan was developed.

In their estimation, *Almost Always or Often*:

- 59% thought transition-age consumers had a *good understanding* of the Employment Plan;
- 66% thought transition-age consumers understood that they had choices in developing the Plan;
- 44% thought parents had a *good understanding* of the Employment Plan;
- 61% understood the VRS Employment Plan;
- 63% thought the Employment Plan fully incorporated transition-age consumer interests;
- 65% thought the Employment Plan fully incorporated transition-age consumer strengths;
- 70% thought the Employment Plan allowed transition-age consumer expression of vocational interests;

- 64% thought the Employment Plan was appropriate for the geographic location;
- 64% thought the Employment Plan identified the *services transition-age consumers will need*;
- 38% thought parents knew their expected financial contribution;
- 64% thought *coordination between VRS staff and educators is good*; and
- 53% thought the VRS Employment Plan was coordinated with the IEP.

Less than one in three educators (31%) were involved at least *Some* when the VRS Employment Plan was developed, but more than half said that *Almost Always or Often* they (61%) and transition-age consumers (59%) understood the Plan, but less than half (44%) *Almost Always or Often* rated parental understanding as good. Approximately two out of three educators (66%) thought that *Almost Always or Often*: transition-age consumers understood they had choices in developing the Plan; that the Plan fully incorporated transition-age consumer strengths (65%) and interests (63%); that the Plan allowed transition-age consumer expression of their vocational interests (70%); and that it identified the services transition-age consumers would need (64%). About the same proportion *Almost Always or Often* also concluded the Plan was consistent with employment opportunities in the transition-age consumer's geographic area (64%).

Over half of the educators (53%) agreed that *Almost Always or Often* the VRS Employment Plan was coordinated with the IEP, and almost two out of three educators (64%) agreed that *Almost Always or Often* coordination between VRS staff and educators was good.

## **Outcomes**

### **Transition-Age Consumers**

Transition-age consumers expressed difficulty offering generalizations on the effects of their involvement with VRS. VRS was interested in whether the transition-age consumers felt that they were better able to understand themselves and advocate for themselves, as well as their overall sense of satisfaction.

The transition-age consumers found it difficult to notice developmental improvements such as self-advocacy and self-understanding. Trying to determine the role of VRS in those developments only increased that difficulty. Fundamentally, development of self-advocacy and self-understanding were not concepts to which they devoted considerable thought, and when they did, they did not see it as a responsibility of VRS.

In spite of these barriers to considering the concepts, transition-age consumers offered comments that indicated the modeling of VRS staff helped them learn how to communicate their disabilities to others and to advocate for themselves. Although



transition-age consumers were aware of their disabilities, observing VRS staff, and then assuming the role themselves, provided unique learning opportunities for them to develop the ability to discuss their disability with an employer and indicate what they needed to be successful.

While the situations provided the transition-age consumers learning opportunities, they not did often consider themselves as having become competent as self-advocates, but they were learning to do it. They indicated having knowledge of their disability, but were either unable or unwilling to engage in the self-advocacy necessary to insure their success.

Transition-age consumers were more apt than not to feel satisfied with their VRS experience. Specific aspects that contributed to that sense of satisfaction were the personal effort invested in them by VRS staff and the life opportunities they discovered by developing the ability to work.

### **Parents**

Parents, as transition-age consumers, did not assume it was a primary responsibility of VRS to develop disability self-awareness or self-advocacy skills while providing services, but were more apt to notice the development of those skills. Parents were concerned that their children may never develop those skills, and that it would be their role, as parents, to continue to advocate and communicate for their children. Parents commented how VRS assisted in the development of those skills through encouragement and modeling, and were very grateful. They noted that their children learned from watching VRS staff act on their behalf.

### **VRS Staff**

VRS staff provided their perception on the online surveys of transition-age consumer satisfaction outcomes, transition-age consumer self-development, and organizational limitations. Online survey questions on outcomes addressed perceptions of transition-age consumer satisfaction with services and employment outcomes. Transition-age consumer self-development questions addressed transition-age consumer self-advocacy, knowledge of personal strengths, independence and confidence in achieving employment. Finally, VRS staff were asked whether a lack of VRS resources affected successful outcomes.

### ***Satisfaction With Services.***

*Almost Always or Often:*

- 87% of VRS staff perceived transition-age consumers being satisfied with their services; and
- 85 % of VRS staff perceived transition-age consumers being satisfied with their employment outcomes.

### ***Transition-Age Consumer Self-Development.***

*Almost Always or Often:*

- 65% of VRS staff observed improvement of self-advocacy skills;
- 81% of VRS staff noted that transition-age consumers improve their knowledge of personal strengths;
- 77% stated transition-age consumers improve their ability to be independent; and
- 89% thought transition-age consumers left VRS believing that they can achieve competitive employment; and
- 16% said lack of VRS resources prevents transition-age consumers from achieving successful outcomes.

Very high proportions of VRS staff (85%) thought that *Almost Always or Often* transition-age consumers were satisfied with VRS and their employment outcomes and the services they received (87%). Proportions almost as high, *Almost Always or Often*, noted positive personal development among the transition-age consumers in being able advocate for themselves (65%), knowledge of themselves (81%), and personal independence (77%). The highest proportion (89%) believed that *Almost Always or Often* transition-age consumers left the program believing they could achieve competitive employment.

On the other hand, 16% noted that *Almost Always or Often* a lack of resources from VRS prevents transition-age consumers from achieving successful outcomes.

### **Educators**

Secondary education is the primary provider of services until transition-age consumers complete and/or leave it. At that time, VRS generally begins providing services. VRS provides services that often include a combination of education and training, which extend past the time when transition-age consumers are in contact with school staff or connected with secondary educational programs. Therefore, educators are not usually aware of or in contact with transition-age consumers at the time they complete their VRS program. For this reason, educators were asked questions to which they could respond based on the time when they were in close contact with transition-age consumers: whether transition-age consumers were confident about achieving competitive employment and whether the transition-age consumers leave school with supports for employment.

About half of the educators (54%) noted that *Almost Always or Often* transition-age students leave secondary education believing that they can achieve competitive employment. A lower proportion (38%) of educators noted that *Almost Always or Often* transition-age students left secondary education with the supports they needed to enter into employment.

## Data Comparisons

Four groups: transition-age consumers, parents, VRS staff and educators, responded to very similar questions about the stages of the process that transition-age consumers follow when receiving services from VRS. The similarity of the questions was intentional, to allow comparison between the different groups to highlight areas of agreement and disagreement and to better understand the determinants of transition-age consumer satisfaction.

In addition, the responses of VRS staff were sorted by geography to allow comparison between those working in the seven-county, twin cities *Metro* area with *Greater MN*. Previous research indicated the possibility of receiving qualitatively different responses from VRS staff in these different areas.

Preceding sections have delineated and analyzed the data, separately, for each respondent group at each stage of the VRS process. Following is a comparison of the responses from the different respondent groups at each stage of the process. The comparisons are made on two scales. One is whether the groups agreed or disagreed. For example, did all of the groups believe that transition-age consumers understand the role of VRS? The second scale is whether high or low proportions of the groups agreed or disagreed. For example, all the groups may have agreed on whether transition-age consumers understood the role of VRS, but was the agreement that it occurred *Almost Always* or *Often*, or only *Sometimes* or *Almost Never*?

### Stage 1 – Understanding VRS

#### ***Agreements:***

High proportions of VRS staff and educators responded that they were involved *when transition-age consumers/students first receive orientation to VRS or when they are learning about VRS* (VRS staff 82 % to educators 71%).

High proportions of VRS staff and educators responded that *Almost Always* or *Often*:

- Educators relied upon or benefitted from the expertise of VRS staff (VRS staff 65% to educators 66%);
- Communication between VRS staff and transition-age consumers was good (VRS staff 71% to educators 62%); and
- Coordination between VRS and educators was good (VRS staff 66% to educators 65%).

Only the issue of communication between VRS staff and transition-age consumers was comparable with consumer comments. For this aspect it was difficult to discern the nature of communications between VRS staff and transition-age consumers. It seemed that transition-age consumers were aware of VRS staff from IEP meetings, and many described additional meetings, but it was inconclusive whether communications could be described as *good*.

Low proportions of VRS staff and educators responded that *Almost Always* or *Often*:

- Communication between VRS staff and parents is good (VRS staff 41% to educators 44%).

***Disagreements:***

Meaningfully lower proportions of VRS staff than educators responded that *Almost Always* or *Often*:

- VRS staff are involved *early enough* in IEP process (VRS staff 44% to educators 59%).

Meaningfully higher proportions of VRS staff than educators responded that *Almost Always* or *Often*:

- Transition-age consumers *have a general understanding of what VRS does* (VRS staff 66% to educators 42%);
- Parents *have a general understanding of what VRS does* (VRS staff 61% to educators 42%)

VRS staff has a different perception of consumers' understanding of VRS than the other respondents. The focus group comments of the transition-age consumers and parents indicated their lack of understanding of the purpose and scope of VRS, a fact that educators seemed to notice. On the other hand, 66% of VRS staff felt that transition-age consumers *Almost Always* or *Often* had a *general understanding of what VRS does*, and 61% of VRS staff felt parents had the same understanding.

Agreement between VRS staff and educators was inconsistent on the issues of VRS involvement and coordination with educators. VRS staff and educators responded to online survey items regarding their coordination with each other, whether they benefited or relied upon each other's involvement, and whether VRS staff were involved *early enough* in the IEP process. Relatively high proportions of VRS staff and educators agreed on coordination and benefitting from each other's expertise, but disagreed on the timeliness of the involvement of VRS staff in the IEP process.

On communications, high proportions of VRS staff and educators agreed on the likelihood of good communications between VRS and consumers, and that good communications with parents were less likely. In their focus groups, consumers were not as likely to support the contention of VRS staff and educators that they had good communications with VRS. Parents were similar.

Too often transition-age consumers described misunderstandings, beginning with the name of the organization, to confirm the VRS staff and educator perceptions.

Another difference was communication between VRS and parents. Educators and VRS staff disagreed on the probability of good communications between VRS and parents, with a meaningfully higher proportion of VRS staff believing in the likelihood of their occurrence. Parents seemed to support the VRS staff. Parents seemed to be

aware of the name and purpose of the organization, although not fully aware of the totality of services that VRS could provide. Parents did not often voice displeasure with being unable to talk with VRS staff.

## **Stage 2 – Vocational Assessment**

### ***Agreements:***

High proportions of VRS staff and educators responded that *Almost Always* or *Often*:

- Transition-age consumers understand the results of vocational assessments (VRS staff 67% to educators 62%).

Medium-to-high proportions of VRS staff and educators responded that *Almost Always* or *Often*:

- Transition-age consumers understand the purpose of vocational assessments (VRS staff 60% to educators 53%);
- Parents understand the results of vocational assessments (VRS staff 63% to educators 59%).
- Medium proportions of educators responded that *Almost Always* or *Often*:
- They were aware of VRS conducting vocational assessments (educators - 53%).

### ***Disagreements:***

Meaningfully higher proportions of VRS staff than educators responded that *Almost Always* or *Often*:

- They are involved with transition-age consumers during the period of vocational assessments (VRS staff 80% to educators 47%);
- Parents understand the purpose of vocational assessments (VRS staff 71% to educators 53%);
- Coordination between VRS and educators was good (VRS staff 85% to educators 66 %);
- Communication between VRS staff and transition-age consumers is good (VRS staff 85% to educators 61%); and
- Communication between VRS staff and parents is good (VRS staff 63% to educators 50%).

Vocational assessments occur within a wide range of awareness, from the highly aware multi-day assessment with a subcontractor to a subtle inspection of educational

records by VRS staff. Transition-age consumers and parents were not always aware of the assessment, whether it involved the purpose, actual occurrence or the results. Educators, too were not always aware of the assessments being conducted, as only 53% of the educators were aware of assessments *Almost Always or Often*.

Aside from developing the knowledge of the consumer sought with the assessment, VRS wants consumers and parents to know about the assessments, to know their purpose and the results. We have already noted that consumers and parents were not always aware of vocational assessments or really clear on their results. What about educators? One indicator would be the groups perception of coordination between themselves, but meaningfully higher proportions (19%) of VRS staff than educators perceived good coordination *Almost Always or Often*.

The only high level of agreement between VRS staff and educators was that consumers understood the results of vocational assessments. Over 60% of both groups perceived that consumers understood the results *Almost Always or Often*. There was moderate (proportions of 50% to 60%) agreement between the groups that consumers understood the purpose and that parents understood the results *Almost Always or Often*, but a meaningful difference of 18% between the proportions believing that parents understood the purpose of the vocational assessments *Almost Always or Often*.

The other aspects of the time of vocational assessments in the process that were compared were issues of communication and coordination between VRS staff and educators. The difference in perception of good coordination has already been mentioned. Other differences between VRS staff and educators were perceptions of good communication between VRS staff and educators (24%) and good communication between VRS staff and parents (13%).

In general, at the stage during which vocational assessments are conducted, VRS staff perceived much greater understanding, good communication and good coordination than consumers, parents or educators.

Because the geographic location of VRS staff were coded, it was possible to search for differences between VRS staff in the Metro area and VRS staff in Greater MN. Differences between these groups were noted. Unfortunately, this was not possible for educators, and might have explained the greater proportions of positive perceptions of VRS staff than educators.

Meaningfully higher proportions of VRS staff in Greater MN than Metro responded that *Almost Always or Often*:

- Transition-age consumers understand purpose of voc assessments (Metro 66% to Greater MN 56%);
- Parents understand purpose of voc assessments (Metro 78% to Greater MN 60%);
- Transition-age consumers understand results of voc assessments (Metro 72% to Greater MN 63%)

- Parents understand results of voc assessments (Metro 72% to Greater MN 54%)
- Good communication between VRS staff and parents (Metro 70% to Greater MN 56%)
- Good coordination between VRS staff and educators (Metro 90% to Greater MN 79%)

According to VRS staff, consumers and parents in Greater MN were more likely to understand the purpose and results of vocational assessments than those in the Metro area. In addition, meaningfully greater proportions of VRS staff thought that there was good communication between VRS staff and parents, and good coordination between VRS staff and educators.

### **Stage 3 – Career Exploration**

#### ***Agreements:***

High proportions of VRS staff and educators responded that *Almost Always* or *Often*:

- They are involved with transition-age consumers/students while in career exploration (VRS staff 75% to educators 69%).
- Low proportions of educators responded that *Almost Always* or *Often*:
- VRS provides parents with adequate labor market information (VRS staff 40% to educators 32%).

#### ***Disagreements:***

Meaningfully higher proportions of VRS staff than educators responded that *Almost Always* or *Often*:

- VRS provides transition-age consumers/students with adequate labor market information (VRS staff 67% to educators 35%);
- Communication between VRS staff and transition-age consumers is good (VRS staff 86% to educators 55%); and
- Coordination between VRS staff and educators is good (VRS staff 80% to educators 58%).

Meaningfully lower proportions of VRS staff than educators responded that *Almost Always* or *Often*:

- Transition-age consumers fully express their career interests (VRS staff 48% to educators 76%).

In general, consumers and parents were satisfied with career exploration experiences. Although consumers and parents may not have understood career exploration completely, they seemed satisfied with results, as well as the personal attention they received from VRS staff.

Comparisons of the responses of VRS staff and educators on the online surveys indicated room for improvement, based on the differences noted between the two groups. Both groups were asked for their perceptions of whether VRS provided adequate labor market information to consumers and parents, whether consumers were able to express their career interests, whether there was good communication between VRS staff and consumers, and whether good coordination existed between VRS staff and educators.

These comparisons yielded bad news. Other than both groups having a high rate of involvement with transition-age consumers/students during career exploration, there were meaningful differences between them. Although a difference does not mean the VRS staff were wrong, it does indicate that a critical partner, educators, were not perceiving the situation as did VRS staff.

Low proportions of both groups agreed that VRS provided parents with adequate labor market information.

The groups disagreed with meaningful differences, on whether consumers express their career interests (28%); whether VRS provides adequate labor market information to consumers (32%); whether there is good communication between VRS staff and consumers (31%); and whether there is good coordination between VRS staff and educators (22%).

Several questions asked of VRS staff were not asked of educators, because not all educators were thought to be able to respond without speculation. These questions included asking VRS staff about consumers' opportunity for work experience, communication between VRS staff and parents, and coordination between VRS staff and postsecondary staff.

Only 37% of VRS staff thought that *Almost Always or Often* consumers have an opportunity for work experience. Moderate proportions thought that *Almost Always or Often* VRS staff had good communications with parents (53%) and that VRS staff had good coordination with postsecondary staff (60%).

#### **Stage 4 - Employment Plan**

##### ***Agreements:***

Consumers did not always demonstrate being aware of the Employment Plan, but were generally satisfied by their experience with VRS staff during this stage. Sometimes a parent had the Plan in a folder with other papers on a child's case and was unaware of it as the Employment Plan.



### ***Disagreements:***

Meaningfully higher proportions of VRS staff than educators responded that *Almost Always or Often*:

- Transition-age consumers had a *good understanding* of the Employment Plan (VRS staff 85% to educators 59%);
- Parents had a *good understanding* of the Employment Plan (VRS staff 73% to educators 44%);
- Transition-age consumers understood they had choices in developing the Employment Plan (VRS staff 90% to educators 66%);
- The Employment Plan incorporates transition-age consumer interests (VRS staff 86% to educators 63%);
- The Employment Plan fully incorporates transition-age consumer strengths (VRS staff 87% to educators 65%);
- The Employment Plan allowed transition-age consumer expression of vocational interests (VRS staff 88% to educators 70%); and
- The Employment Plan was appropriate for the geographic location (VRS staff 93% to educators 64%);
- The Employment Plan identified the *services transition-age consumers will need* (VRS staff 96% to educators 64%);
- Parents know their expected financial contribution (VRS staff 78% to educators 38%); and
- Coordination between VRS staff and educators is *good* (VRS staff 77% to educators 64%).

There were no agreements between VRS staff and educators for the Employment Plan stage. Meaningful different proportions were noticed on every online survey item to which both groups responded. In each case much greater proportions of VRS staff than educators responded that something occurred *Almost Always or Often*. However, on several of the survey items, the proportion of educators selecting *Almost Always or Often* was fairly high, it was just meaningfully lower than the proportion of VRS staff who chose those same responses.

On ten survey items to which each group responded, the differences ranged from 13% to 40%. The average difference was about 25%.

The differences between the groups surveyed and transition-age consumers and parents indicate a much more positive, robust perspective of the Employment Plan by VRS staff than the others involved.

### ***Demographic differences among VRS staff:***

Meaningfully higher proportions of VRS staff in Greater MN than Metro responded that *Almost Always or Often*:

- Transition-age consumer understands plan (Metro 90% to Greater MN 80%);
- Parent understands plan (Metro 83% to Greater MN 63%);
- Parents know the expected financial contribution (Metro 83% to Greater MN 72%);
- Communication between VRS staff and educators is good (Metro 91% to Greater MN 63%); and
- Coordination between VRS staff and postsecondary education staff is good (Metro 72% to Greater MN 55%).

### **Stage 5 - Outcomes**

#### ***VRS staff and educators***

Comparisons between transition-age consumers, parents, VRS staff and educators on the outcomes of services were not always possible because educators are not usually involved with transition-age students at the time their services from VRS are completed. Transition-age consumers might begin to receive services from VRS while in secondary education, but usually do not complete their cases by the time they leave secondary education. Once transition-age consumers leave secondary education, they lose contact with their secondary-level educators, making it difficult for the educators to respond, without speculation, to outcome-related questions. For this reason, educators were not questioned on whether their transition-age students who received services from VRS were satisfied with those services and their employment outcomes, or whether they were able to better understand their disability and advocate for themselves after receiving services from VRS.

VRS staff responded to several items on transition-age consumer outcomes: satisfaction with services from VRS; satisfaction with employment outcomes; development of self-advocacy skills; development of personal independence; understanding of disability; beliefs about employability; and organizational barriers to employment.

VRS staff and educators had one online survey item in common, although their responses were perceptions of transition-age consumers at different times. VRS staff and educators provided their perceptions whether transition-age consumers leave VRS believing that they can achieve employment. Educators offered their perceptions based on when transition-age consumers left secondary education, while VRS staff provided a perception of the transition-age consumer from when the consumer's case was closed. A range of at least one year, up to three or five years might transpire between when a transition-age student leaves secondary education with completion of services from

VRS. During that period of time there could be significant occurrences in the transition-age consumer's life, as well as growth and development of the transition-age consumer.

Meaningful differences in the proportions of VRS staff and educators who thought transition-age consumers leave VRS believing they can achieve employment were evident. Much greater proportions of VRS staff (89%) than educators (54%) believed that *Almost Always or Often* transition-age consumers left VRS believing they could achieve employment.

### ***VRS staff and transition-age consumers and parents***

It was noted above, in the primary phase of the analysis of the data, that very high proportions of VRS staff expressed very positive perceptions of transition-age consumer satisfaction and other outcomes. At least 2 out of 3 VRS staff perceived transition-age consumer satisfaction or positive developmental outcomes *Almost Always or Often*.

The critical question is whether transition-age consumers and parents shared the perceptions of VRS staff. One issue in this comparison is that it could be considered a comparison of 'apples and oranges,' a comparison of dissimilar responses. VRS staff offered their perceptions by selecting one of several choice categories on an online survey. Transition-age consumers and parents participated in focus groups. They each discussed several issues and their discussions were analyzed for recurring themes.

In addition, the proportions of VRS staff compared with the proportions of transition-age consumers and parents involved were unequal. All VRS staff received an opportunity to respond to the online survey, and a high proportion did respond. Only those involved with transition-age consumers, a considerable proportion of the group, were asked to continue. On the other hand, there were only eight focus groups, four for transition-age consumers and four for parents, with an average of five or six transition-age consumers and a slightly higher number of parents, participating in each focus group.

Nevertheless, the validity of focus groups as a research tool has been established. We can trust that the focus groups were genuine sources of information for assessing transition-age consumer satisfaction, albeit in a different manner than that used for VRS staff. The focus groups, as the online surveys, were developed with broad stakeholder input and review, and were conducted according to acknowledged 'best practices,' employing accepted protocols.

**Overall, it was found that transition-age consumers and parents supported the positive perceptions of VRS staff , with some qualifications.**

Rather than hinder understanding of the perceptions and feelings of transition-age consumers and parents, the focus group format clarified and validated their perceptions. If transition-age consumers and parents were given surveys, as past experience indicates, they would not have responded at an acceptable rate to make the responses usable. If we had received sufficient responses, interpretation of the responses would have been a problem. When asked to respond to a question on a survey about satisfaction, a transition-age consumer or parent may have been forced to

provide a misleading response due to the multiple-choice format. The focus group format allowed transition-age consumers and parents the latitude to explain and elaborate on their responses, to foster a comprehensive understanding of the nature of transition-age consumer and parent satisfaction.

#### *Qualification 1 of transition-age consumer satisfaction*

Transition-age consumers and parents expressed satisfaction with VRS and their experience when they perceived that VRS staff actually **cared** about them, and had the time to interact with them. It is our conclusion that, for the most part, that occurs, but when it does not, the situation can degenerate quickly. Parents are forced to find out how to complain, and to whom. Whether they perceive VRS as receptive to their complaint, i.e., whether they perceive VRS being willing to listen to them; is another determinant of satisfaction. VRS has many chances to attain high levels of transition-age consumer satisfaction. At each opportunity, if VRS demonstrates personal interest and the willingness to listen to transition-age consumers and parents it will result in satisfied transition-age consumers and parents. Transition-age consumers and parents demonstrated they could be satisfied in spite of the service aspect not being overly successful, or not receiving exactly what they desired or expected.

#### *Qualification 2 of transition-age consumer satisfaction*

Transition-age consumers and parents were not always clearly aware of what to expect from VRS. It was common for parents to not clearly understand the comprehensive approach VRS takes in providing services and to simply see VRS as a quick path for a job for a summer or part-time job. It was only later that they learned VRS had a long-term focus on consumers developing skills to make them employable with an area of their career interest. In other words, their expectations were not always as high as they should have been, and it may have been easier for VRS to achieve satisfaction in that context.

#### *Summary*

**The qualifications noted above notwithstanding, transition-age consumers and parents seemed to be as satisfied as VRS staff perceived them to be with their services.** Complementary areas, such as development of self-advocacy and understanding one's disability, were perceived by VRS staff, transition-age consumers and parents as covariates with attainment of employment goals. It may not have been the focus of VRS to attain those goals, but it seemed to all parties involved that they tended to occur with employment.

## Conclusions

Preceding sections have described the purpose, structure and data collections methods of the study. Following were descriptions and analyses of the data. The conclusions below reflect a synthesis of the focus group data from transition-age consumers and parents, and the online survey responses from VRS staff and educators.

### Conclusion Number 1:

**In general, transition-age consumers and parents are satisfied.** Transition-age consumers and parents made this clear, although with certain qualifications, in their focus group discussions. In spite of misunderstanding several critical aspects, such as program purpose and scope of services, transition-age consumers and parents expressed appreciation for the personal concern VRS staff, especially counselors provided, as well as their availability to listen to consumer concerns.

### Conclusion Number 2:

**Satisfaction of transition-age consumers and their parents is strongly related to the degree VRS staff demonstrate personal concern for the transition-age consumers.** For the most part, transition-age consumers and parents noticed and appreciated the sense of personal concern VRS staff provide. That sense of personal concern was the main determining factor of transition-age consumer satisfaction. Transition-age consumers and parents provided examples of satisfaction with services in spite of vocational assessments that were contrary to their interests, exploratory experiences to which they were opposed, or employment goals they initially felt were incorrect. In practically every case the consumer or parent concerns were mitigated by the caring attitudes of VRS staff.

### Conclusion Number 3:

**VRS staff have a positive perception of the program.** High proportions of VRS staff believe that *Almost Always or Often*: transition-age consumers and parents are satisfied; communication between VRS staff and transition-age consumers, parents, educators and others is good; transition-age consumers, parents and educators understand and are aware of what VRS staff do in the course of providing services to transition-age consumers; and communication and coordination between VRS staff and educators is good.

#### Conclusion Number 4:

**The positive perception of VRS expressed by large proportions of VRS staff is not always shared by similar proportions of transition-age consumers, parents or educators.** Meaningfully lower proportions of educators than VRS staff perceived that transition-age consumers and parents:

- understood VRS;
- understood the mechanics of provision of its services;
- understood the Employment Plan; or
- understood that the Employment Plan incorporated transition-age consumer strengths or allowed for expression of vocational interests.

Meaningfully lower proportions of educators than VRS staff perceived good communication and coordination between themselves and VRS staff.

On ten online survey items about the Employment Plan stage, meaningfully lower proportions of educators responded that a condition or activity occurred *Almost Always or Often*. On these ten responses differences between educators and VRS staff ranged from 13% to 40%, averaging 25%.

#### Conclusion Number 5:

**Transition-age consumers and parents do not always have an optimal understanding of VRS.** Misunderstandings included:

- the name and purpose of VRS;
- services to expect from the program;
- vocational assessments;
- career exploration; and
- the Employment Plan.

#### Conclusion Number 6:

**VRS staff and educators have not reached an optimal level of communication and coordination.** Comments from educators described the difficulty to secure attendance of VRS staff at IEP meetings, although VRS staff describe not being included early enough.

Meaningfully lower proportions than VRS staff noticed positive aspects of transition-age consumer services (Conclusion Number 4), an indicator of poor communication.

Conclusion Number 7:

**Differences exist between VRS staff in metropolitan and greater Minnesota areas.**

Greater proportions of VRS staff from offices in *Greater MN* report transition-age consumer understanding of the Employment Plan, parent understanding of the Employment Plan; communication with educators; and coordination with postsecondary education, than those in the *Metro* (Minneapolis/St. Paul) area.

## **Recommendations**

### **Recommendation Number 1:**

#### **Foster transition-age consumer satisfaction.**

VRS should continue to focus on providing service to its transition-age consumers that incorporates demonstration of personal concern by VRS staff. VRS should also continue its efforts to assist all staff in developing an orientation toward transition-age consumers that incorporates that concept.

### **Recommendation Number 2:**

#### **Communication with transition-age consumers and parents.**

VRS should continue, and increase, its efforts to foster communication with and understanding by transition-age consumers and parents of transition age consumers with the goal that all transition-age consumers and parents:

- know its name;
- know its purpose;
- know about and understand all assessments that are conducted;
- know about career exploration opportunities; and
- know about and understand the Employment Plan.

### **Recommendation Number 3:**

#### **Communication among parents.**

VRS should develop the structure for parent support/communication groups, so that parents can communicate with each other and share ideas and information.

### **Recommendation Number 4:**

#### **Communication and coordination with educators.**

VRS should continue, and increase, its efforts to foster communication and coordination with educators with the goal that:

- VRS involvement in IEP's will be appropriate;
- VRS staff and educators will provide services seamlessly; and
- Employment Plans will be coordinated with IEP's.



Recommendation Number 5:

**Resolve geographical differences among VRS staff.**

VRS should address and resolve differences in the provision of services that exist between VRS staff in the Twin Cities, metropolitan area and VRS staff in Greater Minnesota.

## Appendix 1: Rehab Services Staff Survey on Transition-Age Consumers

For this survey, a transition-age consumer is a consumer whose case was opened during any one of these times: 1) while in high school; 2) shortly after exiting high school or other secondary-level education; or 3) from the ages of 14 through 21. Abbreviations: RS/VR = Rehabilitation Services, Consumer = transition-age consumer Use 'Not Applicable' (NA) if a question asks about an area that is not part of your work or with which you are unfamiliar.

How much of your time is devoted to transition-age consumers? (Choose ONE)

- Less than 25%
- 25% - 75%
- More than 75%

There are five sections to the survey: I. ORIENTATION TO RS/VR Stage II. VOCATIONAL ASSESSMENT Stage III. CAREER EXPLORATION Stage IV. EMPLOYMENT PLAN Stage V. OUTCOMES

### ORIENTATION TO RS/VR Stage - includes intake, orientation, and getting acquainted with consumer

Are you involved to any degree with the stage when transition-age consumers and their families first receive orientation to RS/VR? (Choose ONE)

- Yes, A Great Deal
- Yes, Some
- Yes, But Only A Little
- No, Not At All

DURING the orientation to RS/VR stage: in your experience, how often does each of the following occur?

Almost Always      Often      Sometimes      Almost Never      Not Applicable, Don't Know

RS/VR staff get included early enough in the IEP process.  
Communication between RS/VR staff and consumers is good.  
Communication between RS/VR staff and parents is good.  
School staff rely on the expertise of RS/VR staff.  
Coordination between RS/VR staff and school staff is good.

By the END of the orientation to RS/VR stage: in your experience, how often does each of the following occur?

Almost Always      Often      Sometimes      Almost Never      Not Applicable, Don't Know

Consumers have a general understanding of what RS/VR does.  
Parents have a general understanding of what RS/VR does.

From your experience, please describe the weakest part of the orientation to RS/VR stage in meeting consumer needs.

How could this part be improved?

From your experience, please describe the strongest part of the orientation to RS/VR stage in meeting consumer needs.

### VOCATIONAL ASSESSMENT Stage - includes gathering information, administering tests, and reading results

Are you involved to any degree with the stage when vocational assessments are made? (Choose ONE)

- Yes, a great deal
- Yes, some
- Yes, but only a little
- No, not at all

DURING the vocational assessment stage: in your experience, how often does each of the following occur?

Almost Always      Often      Sometimes      Almost Never      Not Applicable, Don't Know

Consumers understand the purpose of vocational assessments.  
Communication between RS/VR staff and consumers is good.  
Parents understand the purpose of vocational assessments.  
Communication between RS/VR staff and parents is good.  
Coordination between RS/VR staff and school staff is good.

By the END of the vocational assessment stage: in your experience, how often does each of the following occur?

Almost Always      Often      Sometimes      Almost Never      Not Applicable, Don't Know

Consumers understand the results of their vocational assessments.

Parents understand the results of the vocational assessments.

From your experience, please describe the weakest part of the vocational assessment stage in meeting consumer needs.

How could this part be improved?

From your experience, please describe the strongest part of the vocational assessment stage in meeting consumer needs.

### **CAREER EXPLORATION Stage**

Are you involved to any degree with the stage when the consumer is exploring career options? (Choose ONE)

Yes, a great deal

Yes, some

Yes, but only a little

No, not at all

DURING the career exploration stage: in your experience, how often does each of the following occur?

Almost Always      Often      Sometimes      Almost Never      Not Applicable, Don't Know

RS/VR provides consumers with adequate labor market information.

Consumers have an opportunity to get work experience.

Consumers fully express their career interests.

Communication between RS/VR staff and consumers is good.

RS/VR provides parents with adequate labor market information.

Communication between RS/VR staff and parents is good.

Coordination between RS/VR staff and school staff is good.

Coordination between RS/VR staff and post-secondary education staff is good.

From your experience, please describe the weakest part of the career exploration stage in meeting consumer needs.

How could this part be improved?

From your experience, please describe the strongest part of the career exploration stage in meeting consumer needs.

### **EMPLOYMENT PLAN Stage**

Are you involved to any degree with the stage when the Employment Plan is developed? (Choose ONE)

Yes, a great deal

Yes, some

Yes, but only a little

No, not at all

DURING the Employment Plan stage: in your experience, how often does each of the following occur?

Almost Always      Often      Sometimes      Almost Never      Not Applicable, Don't Know

Consumers understand they have choices.

Consumers express their vocational interests.

Consumers' strengths are fully incorporated into the Employment Plan.

Consumers' interests are fully incorporated into the Employment Plan.

Communication between RS/VR staff and consumers about the Employment Plan is good.

Coordination between RS/VR Staff and school staff is good.

Coordination between CRP's (when involved) and RS/VR Staff is good.

Coordination between post-secondary education staff (when involved) and RS/VR Staff is good.

By the END of the Employment Plan stage: in your experience, how often does each of the following occur?

Almost Always      Often      Sometimes      Almost Never      Not Applicable, Don't Know

Consumers have a good understanding of the Employment Plan.

Consumers know their expected financial contribution.

The Employment Plan is appropriate for consumers' geographic location.

The Employment Plan clearly identifies the services consumers will need.

For consumers under age 18, parents have a good understanding of the Employment Plan.

For consumers under age 18, parents know their expected financial contribution.

From your experience, please describe the weakest part of the Employment Plan stage in meeting consumer needs.

How could this part be improved?

From your experience, please describe the strongest part of the Employment Plan stage in meeting consumer needs.

## OUTCOMES

In your experience, how often does each of the following occur as a result of the vocational assessments, career exploration, and Employment Plan?

Almost Always      Often      Sometimes      Almost Never      Not Applicable, Don't Know

Consumers are satisfied with the services received.  
Consumers are satisfied with their employment outcomes.  
Consumers improve their self-advocacy skills, as needed.  
Consumers improve their knowledge of personal strengths, as needed.  
Consumers improve their ability to be independent, as needed.

How often do consumers leave the VR program believing that they can achieve competitive employment? (Choose ONE)

Almost always  
Often  
Sometimes  
Almost never  
Not applicable/Don't know

What prevents consumers from believing that they can achieve competitive employment?

How often does a lack of RS/VR resources prevent consumers from achieving successful outcomes?

Almost always  
Often  
Sometimes  
Almost never  
Not applicable/Don't know

Please add any additional thoughts you have about the ability of RS/VR to provide services for transition-age consumers.

What is your position in Rehabilitation Services? (Choose ONE)

Regional Area Manager  
Rehabilitation Representative or VR-Business Services Specialist  
VR Tech  
VR Placement Coordinator  
Other  
VR Counselor

Click on continue to EXIT the survey.

Thank you for your participation! At this time, we are looking for staff that have devoted more than 25% percent of their time to transition-age consumers. Please click on continue to EXIT the survey.

## Appendix 2: Rehab Services Educator Survey on Transition-Age Consumers

For this survey, a transition-age consumer is a student with an IEP and at least 14 years of age. Abbreviations: RS/VR = Rehabilitation Services (RS) or Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) Services, the program that sends counselors or other staff to the schools to develop programs for transition-age students that lead to employment planning. Use 'Not Applicable' (NA) if a question asks about an area that is not part of your work or with which you are unfamiliar.

1. 1. Have you had any interactions with RS/VR staff during the past two years?

Yes  
No

There are five sections to the survey: I. ORIENTATION TO RS/VR SERVICES II. VOCATIONAL ASSESSMENT III. CAREER EXPLORATION IV. EMPLOYMENT PLAN V. OUTCOMES

### I. ORIENTATION TO RS/VR SERVICES - When transition-age students are learning about the RS/VR program.

Are you involved to any degree with transition-age students when they are learning about Rehabilitation Services? (Choose ONE)

Yes, a great deal  
Yes, some  
Yes, but only a little  
No, not at all

DURING the time transition-age students are learning about RS/VR: in your experience, how often does each of the following occur?

Almost Always      Often      Sometimes      Almost Never      Not Applicable, Don't Know

- 3a. RS/VR staff get involved early enough with transition-age students.  
3b. All the transition-age students needing to learn about RS/VR services have the opportunity to do so.  
3c. Communication between RS/VR staff and transition-age students is good.  
3d. Communication between RS/VR staff and parents of transition-age students is good.  
3e. School staff benefit from the participation of RS/VR staff in education planning meetings.  
3f. Coordination of RS/VR staff with school staff is good.

After transition-age students learn about RS/VR: in your experience, how often does each of the following occur?

Almost Always      Often      Sometimes      Almost Never      Not Applicable, Don't Know

- 4a. Transition-age students have a general understanding of what RS/VR does.  
4b. Parents of transition-age students have a general understanding of what RS/VR does.

Please describe any obstacles you have noticed that prevent RS/VR staff from getting involved with transition-age students.

### VOCATIONAL ASSESSMENT - RS/VR staff compile information about transition-age students' disabilities and barriers to employment, and their vocational interests and aptitudes.

Are you involved to any degree with transition-age students when RS/VR compiles information for vocational assessments? (Choose ONE)

Yes, a great deal  
Yes, some  
Yes, but only a little  
No, not at all

DURING the time when RS/VR compiles information for vocational assessments: in your experience, how often does each of the following occur?

Almost Always      Often      Sometimes      Almost Never      Not Applicable, Don't Know

- 7a. School staff are aware of the RS/VR vocational assessment process.  
7b. Transition-age students are aware of their vocational assessments.  
7c. Communication between RS/VR staff and transition-age students is good.  
7d. Parents of transition-age students are aware of RS/VR vocational assessments of their children.  
7e. Communication between RS/VR staff and parents of transition-age students is good.  
7f. Coordination between RS/VR staff and school staff is good.

By the END of the RS/VR vocational assessment: in your experience, how often does each of the following occur?

Almost Always      Often      Sometimes      Almost Never      Not Applicable, Don't Know

8a. Transition-age students are aware of the results of their RS/VR vocational assessments.

8b. Parents of transition-age students are aware of the results of the RS/VR vocational assessments.

Please describe any challenges transition-age students face in understanding their vocational assessments (vocational strengths & interests, and barriers to their employment)?

**CAREER EXPLORATION - Includes activities assisting transition-age students in making career decisions.**

Are you involved to any degree with transition-age students when they are exploring career options? (Choose ONE)

Yes, a great deal

Yes, some

Yes, but only a little

No, not at all

DURING career exploration: in your experience, how often does each of the following occur?

11a. RS/VR provides transition-age students with adequate labor market information.

11b. Transition-age students have an opportunity to express their career interests.

11c. Communication between RS/VR staff and transition-age students is good.

11d. RS/VR provides parents of transition-age students with adequate labor market information.

11e. Coordination between RS/VR staff and school staff is good.

Please describe any barriers to career exploration for transition-age students.

**EMPLOYMENT PLAN - In order for RS/VR to provide services, staff develop a document (Employment Plan) with the transition-age student specifying the student's career goal and the services RS/VR will provide.**

Are you involved to any degree with transition-age students when the RS/VR Employment Plan is developed? (Choose ONE)

Yes, a great deal

Yes, some

Yes, but only a little

No, not at all

In the DEVELOPMENT the RS/VR Employment Plan: in your experience, how often does each of the following occur?

Almost Always      Often      Sometimes      Almost Never      Not Applicable, Don't Know

14a. Transition-age students understand they have choices.

14b. Transition-age students express their vocational interests.

14c. Transition-age students' strengths are fully incorporated into the RS/VR Employment Plan.

14d. Transition-age students' interests are fully incorporated into the RS/VR Employment Plan.

14e. Coordination between RS/VR Staff and school staff is good.

By the END of the development of the RS/VR Employment Plan: in your experience, how often does each of the following occur?

Almost Always      Often      Sometimes      Almost Never      Not Applicable, Don't Know

15a. Transition-age students are aware of the RS/VR Employment Plan.

15b. The RS/VR Employment Plan is appropriate for transition-age students' geographic location (career goal is consistent with area employment).

15c. The RS/VR Employment Plan clearly identifies the services transition-age students will need.

15d. Parents of transition-age students under the age of 18 have a good understanding of the RS/VR Employment Plan.

15e. Parents of transition-age students under the age of 18 know their expected financial contribution.

15f. I understand the RS/VR Employment Plan.

The RS/VR Employment Plan is coordinated with the IEP.

How could RS/VR improve the development of the Employment Plan?

**OUTCOMES**

In your experience, how often does each of the following occur?

Almost Always      Often      Sometimes      Almost Never      Not Applicable, Don't Know

- 17a. Transition-age students leave secondary school with the supports they need to enter into employment.
- 17b. Transition-age students leave secondary school believing that can achieve employment.

What prevents transition-age students from believing that they can achieve employment?

Do you have any other comments about the services RS/VR provides to transition-age students?

Please click on continue to EXIT the survey.

Thank you for your participation! At this time, we are looking for educators that have had interactions with RS/VR staff and transition-age consumers the past two years. Please click on continue to EXIT the survey.